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A fabulous Year at Château Gruaud Larose

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GUILLAUME JOURDAN

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CHAPTER I

October 2009

Striking Out

9:06 a.m. ... I OPENED A BLEARY EYE to find my alarm clock blaring like a bugle in my brain. Oh my god! Nine o'clock had slipped by me – how did I ever manage to sleep so late! And just why didn't my alarm clock go off earlier! I had to jump into the shower as quickly as possible to make up for the morning that was fast slipping by. Damn it!

I scrambled out of bed when I suddenly realised... Since yesterday, I no longer had any obligation to get up at six o'clock as I'd done every morning for the past twenty years. A sweet breeze of liberty swirled around me as I savoured this first day of whimsical leisure.

I thought I'd begin with a gargantuan breakfast before going to enjoy the City of Light while most people were scurrying about taking care of business. The very thought of it made me smile... I could just imagine the incredulous Martineau who was surely waiting for me this morning. I do believe he still hadn't understood that this sabbatical leave was anything but a joke.

"But after all, Paul," he told me, "doesn't it make you think? You're one of the most promising managers in our company and now you want to take a year off, at the very moment that we're

pinning our precious hopes on you? Come now, it's high time you quit your joking and got back to work!"

It had taken me quite a bit of time to be able to claim my right to a sabbatical leave that was so generously offered by my employer to all members of the firm. Evidently, they had never imagined that it might interest their "high potential" elements, destined for brilliant futures and no doubt thirsting for power. And yet, at the very moment that they were asking me to take charge of our largest subsidiary in the United States, I began to be besieged with doubts. This life, constantly between two planes, juggling between meetings, business dinners and other festivities – was that really what I had always dreamt of? Sure, I made an excellent living, I had a job that was exciting and more than gratifying and I was part of a certain distinguished upper class. While I could buy most anything my heart desired, I suddenly found myself before a huge void. Such a life provided me with a certain social veneer, professional satisfaction and left me quite at ease financially, but the truth was, a profound boredom was beginning to set in. What ever became of the little boy who dreamed of becoming an aviator so that he could always have his head in the clouds? Or the young man who would later imagine a life like a Balzac novel where pleasures, modest as they may be, prevail... Both of them were now long gone, well hidden under the years of labour required for becoming a top manager, as they said at Martineau & Co. Suddenly, life seemed so dreary. What was the point? I suddenly decided that all of that had to change... and change now!

I hadn't the foggiest notion of what I wanted to do but I had a crystal clear idea of what I *no longer* wanted to do. From that moment on, I simply couldn't handle any of it any more – Martineau and his petty flattery, the other young wolves who had been my friends and enemies for years and for whom I could now only

feel the deepest indifference, even a bit of sadness. I really think that work had so totally absorbed me during those years that it had completely exhausted me and there seemed to be no way of getting that Vital Flame back. Thus, I had to go on to the next step as quickly as possible and I just couldn't see any other way out at that point other than radically changing my life. So I decided to take a long holiday. To be able to think about all of that, calmly and objectively. It was useless to search for a totally new direction before giving some serious thought to it all. Fortunately, as Martineau would have said, I hadn't lost my common sense.

It was when I began to look at my accrued holidays that I became aware of the many advantages offered by the firm. It had never interested me before. I thus discovered that there was an entire range of possibilities that existed that I'd never even suspected.

That was how I learned that my firm offered, and I quote, to "all members of Martineau & Co. the option of taking a sabbatical leave of one year without pay following which the firm was obliged to offer to the said individual a position equivalent to that which they had left and with the same remuneration."

All of that seemed to good to be true and I decided to find out more about such an El Dorado. That was the beginning of a long series of discussions and interviews of all types with the members of the duly named Human Resources and then the executive management who was quite taken aback by my request. My friend Jean-Louis, the high-strung lawyer of our venerable firm had assured me that it was simply implacable and that as unbelievable as may seem, he could not refuse my request forever and he could at best put it off for some six months.

And that's exactly what happened. After much beating about the bush of which I'll spare you the boring details, I managed to get Martineau's approval. On 18 October 2009, I left Martineau

& Co. for a full year of total liberty. 365 days to invent a new life looked as though it should suffice...not to mention being terribly exciting!

I had put so much energy into having them accept my request for sabbatical leave that I hadn't even taken the time to think about what I'd actually do to busy myself throughout the year. Take a trip around the world to better find myself, face to face? In fact, I think that would have quickly become rather depressing, I abhorred travelling alone. An adventure that wasn't shared was no adventure at all, in my opinion. I had travelled the world over in the past few years at Martineau and I had the opportunity on several occasions to visit and explore many countries, yet every time being alone before such treasures left me with such an empty feeling.

No, all I knew was that I had to take time off for myself to think about just what I wanted to do with my life. Being inactive for months on end just thinking about it was out of the question, though. It wasn't my nature and I thought that it would do nothing more than soften my brain without really helping me find my way.

I just had to get some rest, but I had to be involved in some sort of project.

So I began to toss up a few ideas about my project with my friends and acquaintances. Most of them, some of them with a pinch of jealousy that was only scantily disguised, tried to convince me to simply forget such folly and get back to Martineau & Co. ASAP, that is, if indeed they would still have me, silly boy that I was. Hmm, that certainly wasn't much help... Then others, the wackier ones, suggested things that were simply off the wall that left me more puzzled than anything else: writing a book on the world's best bars. That, of course (a brilliant idea

of my Irish friend Paddy) would allow me to stay drunk without spending a penny. Then a professor friend of mine suggested living the drudgery of a year in a factory to better understand the harsh reality of life. Charles, hedonist as one might suspect, had plotted a rather predictable trajectory: 365 women over 365 days... all in all, nothing worthy of much interest. I was beginning to wonder if I'd made the right decision when, just one month prior to making the big move, I put up an old friend, Pierre, who was passing through Paris.

I had always appreciated Pierre's cheerful company and wisdom. It was a sheer pleasure to have dinner with him and we had gotten into the habit of enjoying some of the finer flasks whenever he dropped in.

In fact, Pierre enjoyed the privilege of being the happy owner of Chateau Gruaud Larose, with its Second Growth St Julien wine, and was an unrivalled Epicurean which, unfortunately, was an endangered species.

We found ourselves precisely at Day 25 when the fateful dinner that would give meaning to the entire year to come would take place.

On the eve of the dinner, I selected a precious bottle of Côteau de Vernon 2006 from my cellar. I knew that Pierre had a special affection for the Condrieu and that it would be a splendid accompaniment to my petits fours from Malitourne. With a wine from Tuscany, Giorgio Primo 2007 that would bring out the very best of the luscious rib steak that I had ordered from the Nivernaise butcher shop.

Pierre arrived at 8:00 p.m. sharp as usual, with two bottles of Gruaud Larose 2007, one for dinner, one for keeping !

I thought I'd take advantage of the aperitif to expose my projects. Pierre was the first one to have this reaction:

“So, you’ve finally decided to make a move! I was wondering how long you’d be able to hang on to your fool’s existence, excuse me if I offend you, but I never could understand how a young man such as yourself could find satisfaction in such an empty, tasteless life!”

His reaction reassured me about my decision. Here was finally someone who understood me and who didn’t treat me like some sort of leaf in the wind. I related my concerns to him as to how I’d be filling my days in the coming months. I was definitely seeking to make some kind of sense out of my life and figure out just what I’d be doing after a year off but, short term, sitting there twiddling my thumbs was simply not my nature.

That was when Pierre proposed with his characteristically communicative enthusiasm to come spend my first month of freedom at Gruaud Larose.

“The change will do you good. You’ll be just as able to think about things in the wide open spaces as have a good time in and around Bordeaux. Don’t you worry, you’ll find plenty to do because there’s always need for an extra hand on the Domain, there’s no lack of work. And between you and I, a little bit of manual labour certainly won’t do you any harm,” he concluded as he burst into laughter.

I let myself be won over with no great difficulty. What a great idea, I’d always been fascinated by wine – even if I hadn’t the slightest idea as to how it was made – and I had always wanted to visit Pierre to learn a bit more about it. That had never been possible before, what with an agenda that simply left no time for such pursuits.

So it was an ideal opportunity. I’d be able quench my thirst for knowledge while having the time to rest and reflect in a peaceful environment where I could let my mind run free.

Pierre inventoried the wealth of charms to be found at Gruaud Larose and his enticing account ended up leaving me thoroughly convinced.

As our dinner came to an end, I couldn’t thank my host enough for his hospitality and from that moment I began to dream of the multifarious pleasures that I would be able to discover at Gruaud Larose.

The next twenty five days seemed endless up until that landmark morning when my alarm clock put an end to my dreaming at 9:06. That’s it, we were on our way, I was finally free and tomorrow I would be taking the TGV 8225 at 10:55 a.m. that would bring me to Chateau Gruaud-Larose for 30 days of pleasure amidst new horizons. Since I would be leaving Paris, I decided to treat myself to a regal breakfast in total sybaritic luxury of the likes that can only be found in Paris.

I got dressed quickly and headed for the much revered Hotel Meurice. The sommelier, who advised me only the best wines when I brought my clients for dinner to the gastronomic restaurant, had once whispered to me that their breakfasts were also otherworldly. It was high time to take him up on such wise counsel.

So I heaved the majestic door to the Meurice open and stopped for a moment before the looking glass that invites those passing by to leave their thought for the day on an ephemeral glass. I scrawled the word “liberty” and entered the dining area to revel in breakfast.

I flipped through the breakfast menu and my eyes lit upon a curiosity: the Choc Alleno.

“If you enjoy discovering the strong tastes and sensations that chocolate has to offer, Chef Yannick Alleno shall respond with intensity and subtlety to your most demanding expectations for a full-bodied breakfast, the Choc’Alleno. The Choc’Alléno breakfast offers the full chocolate croissant and the bread, a crunchy

baguette with its soft part in cacao, salted butter churned from raw milk with melted nuggets of chocolate and a choice of coffee, tea, hot chocolate and fruit juices from the Chef Sommelier.”

That was some programme! I was a bit jolted by this breakfast that was in fact a delight from beginning to end. Having eaten my fill and with the palate well satisfied, I began my morning walk. I walked around my favourite neighbourhood, the heart of Paris, the very soul of the City of Light for me, the first ward that I so loved. I continued along the rue de Rivoli under the arcades sublimated by the morning light and still untouched by the roaring tide of tourists that grew incessantly year by year. I took a long stroll that carried me to the Tuileries Garden at the Louvre, then on to the Palais Royal to finish at the majestic Palais Garnier with its gilded flourishes shimmering in the sun.

It was time to get back to finish packing my bags and take care of a last bit of red tape. I thus finished my day making the final arrangement for my trip, all the while letting my thoughts wander off to the Bordeaux region. So many things that had set me dreaming and had suddenly become accessible. Visiting the greatest sites, strolling about the sublime Burdigala, a night at the opera at the Grand-Theatre, but most of all taking part in everyday life at the Chateau Gruaud-Larose.

CHAPTER 2

November 2009

The Hunting Party

MY ALARM CLOCK WENT OFF at five a.m. sharp. It was truly the first time that I'd gotten up like that at daybreak in such high spirits.

It had already been 10 days since I'd taken up residence at the enchanted Chateau and I must say, I was savouring every minute of it. This sabbatical year was boding well, for I think I hadn't felt so free

As a teenager, that seemed the proper parallel, yes, I'd found in just a few days that youthful drive and unrivalled faith that we have at the age of 15. Pierre had taken the time to spend the first two days in my company, showing me every nook and cranny at Gruaud while recounting the spiciest anecdotes.

He especially brought my attention to the teams getting ready for winter's labour. One of the key tasks was back ploughing. The purpose of this practise was to cover the wine stock with earth to protect the vine from frost.

“Careful now... keep it above the graft or else...!” the foremen constantly repeated.

I also discovered many different types of manual tasks such as pulling out staples and bringing down the trellises. Done entirely by hand, with heavy tools for breaking the vine stock, these are