

When You Run in the Woods by the Chateau, Avoid the Sewage Treatment Area



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Mary booked us for 3 nights at the Chateau, near majestic Yosemite, on the basis of their association with *Relais & Châteaux*. We anticipated a long weekend of elegant comfort, exquisite cuisine and natural beauty. In the course of our scenic drive to this sanctuary we passed through a number of small towns, each consisting of a linear aluminum strip mall and gas station, replete with plastic siding and neon. The Chateau is 9000 square feet of understated elegance nestled on several acres of immaculate landscaping, located smack in the middle of the longest most obnoxious strip mall town of them all. This context was fixed in my mind as we drove slowly up our groomed gravel approach to the reception area. Mary was delighted with

the place but on the way to our room I caught a glimpse, through a tiny hallway window, of a gigantic illuminated Burger King sign atop an enormous roadside pole. Although I saw nothing further beyond the elegant interior of the Chateau and its magnificent grounds, I was aware of the rural industrial monstrosity in which it was embedded and my experience was contaminated by this awareness.

When I recognized this contamination I tried to shake it off by going for a run in the woods near the Chateau, perpendicular to the highway and strip mall. A mile or so into the woods on a dirt road my sense of context shifted toward *beautiful nature*, until I ran straight onto the local trash dump and sewage treatment area. Every town has to have one and I had flushed the toilet at the Chateau myself, but my weekend in nature had been poisoned by my pathological sense of context. Mary did not drag Burger King into the Chateau with her and she thoroughly enjoyed our actual environment.

Your sense of context can dominate your experience of any actual environment. If you are to be hanged in the morning it will be difficult to have fun tonight, even with a limo, and you know your morning will come. Many people have trouble enjoying themselves when their intimate relationships or their careers are going badly. I have a friend who suffers from political depression and financial anxiety is epidemic. Context can be as local and transitory as a back rub or a bee sting, and as global and permanent as a good marriage or death. Your sense of context is critical to the quality of your experience. It is possible and important to manage your own sense of context, reflectively and intentionally, once you realize that this is important and possible. Mary was not in strip mall denial at the Chateau. Mary is healthy and happy. Call me.

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