

Chloë Heuch

The Castle

It took us ages to get there and then, could I find a parking space? So many bloody tourists. Cai needed the toilet. Again. And Osian and Luke were really starting to get on my nerves, bickering over whose football team was the best. Then they saw the castle.

5 It is impressive. I'd been promising the boys we would visit since, well, forever. But it was more than an hour along the coast, and their dad always had something on – drinking with his mates usually.

You come through the town, only able to see the towers sticking up with the flags waving about, then the road takes you past it. The walls loom up¹ from the moat², walls so high your eyes have to travel up to find the sky.

10 Not that my eyes could as I was still looking for a parking space at that point. But you get the picture.

“It’s massive!” Luke yelled in my ear as he leant forward in his seat.

“Put your belt back ON,” I snapped as I spotted someone with reverse lights on about to exit their space. “Woah,” Cai murmured.

15 “It’s just a stupid lump of rock.” Osian folded his arms and looked the other way.

“Too old for fun now, eh Osh?” I glanced at him in the passenger seat as I pulled the car into the empty parking place. His arms were crossed and his brow furrowed. The eldest of my boys. At twelve, he still had some softness of the boy about his face, but his body was too big for itself, growing so fast and so tall. Just like his dad.

20 I bought a ticket from the pay and display³. It was a bright but blustery⁴ day, with a quick wind that tried to steal the ticket from my fingers. After dragging Cai into the public loo (20p⁵?!!) we finally made our way up the mottled stone steps, underneath the portcullis⁶ and through the giant entrance.

“One adult and three children, please.”

25 “That’ll be £26.60⁷ please.”

“Is that the family price?” I asked the lady in the ticket booth.

“Yes, it is a little cheaper than buying individually.”

30 I handed over the money as I eyed Cai and Luke. They had already squeezed past me into the great inner space beyond the entrance. They bounded onto the immaculate green grass, past the neat white sign that read DO NOT WALK ON THE GRASS.

“Lovely day for it.” She smiled at me as she returned my change and a leaflet with the layout of the castle on it. “The falconry display⁸ starts at 12.”

“That’s great. Thanks.” I smiled back. She had kind, patient eyes: a grey-haired old lady who had done her time with children, survived and come out the other side, who sat patiently all day in a

¹ *loom up*: tårner sig op

² voldgrav

³ *pay and display*: parkeringsautomat

⁴ blæsende

⁵ 20 pence (ca. 1,75 kr.)

⁶ gitterport

⁷ ca. 230 kr.

⁸ *falconry display*: rovfugleshow

35 portacabin⁹ and wore neat white blouses.

“Enjoy.” Her gaze moved beyond me to Osian, but he had turned his back on us and stuffed his earpods in again.

40 “Thanks.” Her smile was understanding as she brought her gaze back to me. Moving away, I felt my eyes prickle with tears. God, what was wrong with me?! I could do this. We were a family. I was their mum, like I’d always been. Just because – because HE wasn’t with us, it didn’t make any difference. Steve wouldn’t have been any help even if he was with us, I reminded myself.

45 “Come on Osh,” I tugged my eldest’s arm. “Cai, LUKE!” I shouted as I jogged to reach my two younger boys who were scrambling¹⁰ over a low wall – next to a sign that read DO NOT CLIMB ON THE WALLS. This was a test for myself. I could do single parent. I could do family outings. I could do normal. I could do it on my own.

The walls surrounded us. Granite grey reached up to the blue sky on all sides. The tops of the walls were walkways between each of the towers. I could see people strolling along. [...]

“Right. You must not go on the walls without me. Okay? No running on them and be careful on the stairs.”

50 “Yeah okay. Come ON mum.” Cai dragged me toward the sign marked DUNGEON.

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“Wow,” I exclaimed, pointing out the display¹¹ to Osian. “They started building in 1384. Can you imagine? These stones are seriously old. There would have been no forklifts or cranes to help, would there?”

“What?” he said, pulling out his earpods.

55 I had dragged the kids inside one of the towers marked MUSEUM, while we waited for the falconry display. It was easier than trying to stop the younger ones from doing something crazy a hundred feet up a tower. I thought maybe Osian would find something to interest him. But it was the same response I’d been getting all summer: flat¹², uninterested.

60 I missed my boy; the one whose brown eyes would open in wonder when we showed him things: tractors, planes, birds. He’d had so much interest and curiosity in our great wide world. Now though, since the divorce, and even before it, he had retreated inside the walls of himself. The portcullis was well and truly down.

65 “I was just saying – how old it is... the castle...” I faltered¹³ under that dead gaze of his and I looked away. I felt tears again trying to beat me, trying to escape. “Come on,” I managed. “Let’s go see the birds.” He shrugged my hand off his arm and walked out into the brightness, chewing the edge of his lip.

A crowd was gathering around a white cordon¹⁴ on the grass in the centre of the castle where two handlers¹⁵ stood. One waited at the far end by a tall perch¹⁶. The second was a young woman with a mike attached to her polo shirt. She had a large leather glove on one hand and balanced

⁹ (her) billetkontor

¹⁰ kravlede

¹¹ (her) informationstavle

¹² tonløst

¹³ (her) blev usikker

¹⁴ afspærring

¹⁵ rovfugletrænere

¹⁶ siddepind

70 upon it was a small bird of prey. She smiled and began to address the audience. Cai and Luke
wriggled forward through the throng. Osian stayed beside me at the back.

“Welcome to the Castle Falconry display,” the woman explained. “Among the birds you will see
today are a variety of raptors¹⁷ that would have been used by medieval lords as entertainment and
sport. This here is Arthur.” She raised her arm into the air to show us the sharp beaked bird, whose
75 quick eyes took us all in. “Anyone know what kind of bird he is?”

A few hands went up and someone at the front called out “Peregrine Falcon¹⁸.”

“Correct.” The handler smiled. “Peregrines have a blue-grey back like Arthur here – ” She
stopped to put a small titbit of meat between the finger and thumb of the glove. The bird wrenched
at¹⁹ it using his beak. “He also has the barred²⁰ underparts and a blackish head. Of course,
80 peregrines are renowned for their speed... ”

Cai and Luke were still, for once, mesmerised²¹ by the handler and the peregrine as she walked
backwards and forwards along the cordon.

The younger ones were less affected by the divorce. At least, they hadn’t shown any major
upset. Cai had started wetting the bed again when Steve moved out, and Luke had asked lots of
85 questions. But that seemed to have passed now and they’d accepted it. Mum and Dad didn’t love
each other anymore. That’s all there was to it.

I kept my opinions to myself as much as I could. For example, the fact Steve only loved himself
and there was no room for anyone else in his heart. That he was a selfish bastard and would always
let others down, no matter what. They still saw him every week: Tuesdays and Saturdays. But he
90 was starting with the excuses already.

I watched the peregrine, who was now flying freely far above our heads. It seemed impossible
he would ever return as he arced²² high above the crenellations²³, a boomerang shape against the
blue. But he turned and bulleted back²⁴ toward the lure²⁵. The male handler swung the lure in an
arc and the peregrine almost caught it, but then swooped back up into the sky. Osian’s eyes
95 followed it.

I wondered if this new Osian would have appeared anyway to replace my lovely, sweet boy. If he
was just the teenage version and that the changes I saw in him were inevitable. He’d be thirteen
soon. Everyone kept telling me kids grew up quicker these days. Was this sullenness just part of
growing up? Or was it my fault? Had I missed something? Should I have stuck with Steve until they
100 were older?

The peregrine flew and dived again. Then the handler gave him the meat he longed for and he
settled back on to the glove. [...]

“Beautiful, isn’t he?” I said to Osian.

It took me a moment to register, but when I saw him bring his sleeve up to his eyes, it sunk in.
105 Osian was crying.

“Love, what is it?” I leaned toward him, desperate to comfort him but he shrugged me off.

¹⁷ rovfugle

¹⁸ *Peregrine Falcon*: vandrefalk

¹⁹ *wrenched at*: rev i

²⁰ stribede

²¹ tryllebundet

²² fløj i en bue

²³ borgens brystværn

²⁴ *bulleted back*: (her) fløj som et projektil

²⁵ lokkemad

“Don’t Mum.”

“Don’t what?”

110 “Don’t – ” He lifted his hands and shook them, as though trying to free his fingers from a sticky cobweb. Then he looked at me. At last, he really looked at me. Proper eye contact. The first since what felt like forever. His marble²⁶ eyes had softened and were wet with tears. He looked into mine.

“Mum – ”

“What’s wrong Osh?” I fought the impulse to put my arm around him.

115 There was a long pause. His eyes flickered over to the new bird of prey, a kite²⁷ now, larger and more hunched on the handler’s glove, like a covetous scrooge²⁸ over his shred of meat.

Osian took a deep breath. “I want to live with Dad.”

“What?”

“I want to live with Dad.” He said it louder, his gaze not wavering from mine.

120 “But – you do. Tuesdays and Saturdays.” I shook my head, not understanding what he meant.

“I want to live with him all the time. I don’t...” His voice trailed off.

It was my turn for the tears to well up and spill over. It was my turn to wipe my eyes with the back of my sleeve. “But why?”

“I just do.” He shrugged and put his hands in his pockets.

125 I wanted to say Steve put him up to this, just to hurt me. That his dad didn’t really want him at all. My spite²⁹ bubbled, forming into words, but... Osh. Sweet, lovely Osh. If I put that thought in his mind, it would flutter around inside him banging into reason, waking him in the middle of the night. Instead I asked, “Does Dad know what you want?”

Osian nodded. I could hardly breathe.

130 He looked at me like he had never looked at me before: grown up, decisive, like he knew stuff I didn’t. And I felt it all the way through me. He meant it and I would not be able to change his mind. He was not my little boy. He was his own person and this was his own decision and I had to let him make it. I was powerless against it. All of it: his dad, his influences, our life, the history of us, the family. This is what it had come to. Broken down into small pieces that could float away anywhere.

135 “Okay,” I said finally. “If that’s your decision. But I’ll always be here for you.” I imagined myself like these old castle walls. Enduring. Always ready to protect him if he needed me. It would be his decision if he returned or if he flew on, out of sight.

“Thanks Mum.” He smiled and he hugged me. Proper hugged me, arms right round my waist and his head nuzzled into the crook of my arm.

140 I kept my arm round him as we watched the red kite soar into the blue sky, high above the castle, above us, above it all.

And then he dived.

(2021)

²⁶ (her) hårde

²⁷ glente

²⁸ *covetous scrooge*: begærlig gnier

²⁹ (her) modvilje