

THE CASTLE



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ADVENTURES IN A WORLD OF UNRAVELING MEN
JON RONSON

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THE CASTLE

*Adventures in
a World of
Unraveling
Men*

Jon Ronson

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For Joel

The Impossibility of Keeping a Harem in the Post-#MeToo Age

I awoke one morning in the summer of 2023 to discover that, while I’d slept, my son Joel had been texting my wife and me a series of unnerving messages about a perilous situation he had found himself in in Connecticut. Given that the whole crisis had unfolded while I was asleep and completely oblivious, I saw his final text first: “We left. Was completely fucked. All good now.”

Now bolt awake, I read his other messages, urgently trying to piece together the night’s events. From what I could tell, he and three friends had been invited to a party at a stranger’s house, a man one of them had met online earlier that week. But when they arrived, they found his home so bizarre Joel did something he’d never done before—he sent me the coordinates and a photograph, just in case.

. . .

THE PHOTOGRAPH WAS of a vast medieval castle with a drawbridge, gargoyles, and many—I couldn’t shake the sense that there were *too* many—spires and towers and turrets, reaching like skeletal fingers to the looming clouds above.



“I honestly have no clue what is going on,” read Joel’s second text. “This is very weird.”

And then his final text: “We left. Was completely fucked. All good now.”



“You drive down a road in the middle of a forest and then there’s this gate and it’s just a huge, massive castle.”

It was three weeks later and Joel and his friends were sitting in my office in upstate New York, recounting for me the disquieting events that had occurred that night. It all began with Joel’s friend Nellie. She was a nightlife promoter and used Tinder for work networking, hence her matching with a man in his early sixties named Chris Mark. Soon afterward she’d received an invitation: “Castle party Saturday! 3:00 pm to whenever. Dress code: Formal. Tell your friends. 18+ to come, 21+ to drink.”

It took them three hours to drive from New York City to the pleasant town of Woodstock, Connecticut. Then their GPS took them out of town,

onto a winding forest road, and finally to a set of imposing iron gates. They stared at the menacing castle that loomed beyond, urgently discussed turning around, but then the gates swung open and they found themselves entering.

. . .

STANDING ON THE DRAWBRIDGE were a man, a woman, and a large black guard dog with a long, hooked face.

The man was the castle's owner, Chris Mark. "He had sharp blue eyes," Joel's friend Delaney said, "but glazed over."

"And he had a cut above one of his eyes," said Joel.

The dog was called Cerberus, named after the multiheaded hound that guards the gates of Hades.

The woman was blond and much younger than Chris Mark. Nobody caught her name, so I'll call her Amber. She felt reassuring to them, normal and organized in an otherwise discomfiting situation.

"And then," Joel said, "Chris Mark sort of beckoned us inside the castle."

I nodded for them to continue, then I let out a scream.

. . .

IN TERMS OF FINDING themselves in unsettling situations with men in their late fifties or early sixties, my son and his friends were, I have to admit, somewhat out of the frying pan and into the fire. Six days earlier I had been in surgery, having a foot of my colon removed due to diverticulitis. I was still in pain, which was causing me to let out sudden, unexpected shrieks. They politely tried not to react, but I noticed them involuntarily recoil, in the way that people their age—mid-twenties—sometimes do when they're face-to-face with an older person suffering disconcerting ailments. If your third act is still a faraway horror, you don't want to know.

I apologized for the screaming and they continued. After Chris Mark gestured them inside, they entered a grand baronial banqueting hall decorated with the kinds of artifacts that wealthy explorers from olden times used to accumulate: suits of armor, sculptures of Nubian slaves, ornate thrones, carved dragons, and the centerpiece, a vast polished dining table set for sixteen, with candelabras and crystal glasses and silver cloches.

But there was something else about the room, something more unnerving than those relics of ancient wars. It was that there was *no party*. They'd expected to find one in full flow, but instead it was completely empty, all except for a small number of equally bewildered young people standing around awkwardly.

"Did you ask them what was going on?" I said.

"We asked everyone we saw," replied Delaney. "'Where's the party?' They all said, 'We don't know. We thought this was a party too.' They were all very lost as well. They had all arrived under similar pretenses, thinking they were there for a party."

Finally, Chris Mark entered his banqueting hall.

"I'm sorry, but where's the party?" someone asked him.

"Oh no," he replied. "I've invited you here for a different reason."

The room fell silent.

"Which is?" someone said.

"I'd like you all," Chris Mark replied, "to take part in my reality show."

"What's the name of your reality show?" Joel asked him.

"*101 Princesses*," he said. Then he turned to Nellie and Delaney. "Are you ready to get into your princess costumes? Come downstairs to my costume room."

. . .

HE DESCENDED the spiral staircase that led to his basement, gesturing for Nellie and Delaney to follow. Which they did. I found this part of their story

especially melancholy. They'd been so polite, so eager to please and susceptible to the pressure this man was exerting on them, they were prepared to follow him down into the bowels of his castle and dress as princesses. Plus, these were young people trying to make it, and there was the hint of a work opportunity here.

Joel and his male friend Cement watched them go. Then they followed them downstairs.

Chris Mark's costume room was located near his hot-tub grotto room, which doubled as his botanical garden. Jacuzzi baths nestled among subterranean plants illuminated by purple lamps. In the next room was his pole-dancing nightclub. There were mannequins and, Delaney said, "a whole collection of extravagant princess attire, racks of medieval gowns and a glass display case of tiaras. He told me to choose a dress and pick a tiara to match because I was one of the princesses. He didn't love my choice. He wanted me to pick something fancier."

Chris Mark seemed more interested in Delaney and Nellie than in Joel and Cement, but he gave them tuxedos to change into all the same. Next they wandered to an upstairs patio where "we met four girls," Joel said, "all dressed as princesses. As soon as we met them, they were incredibly complimentary of us."

"What did they say?" I asked.

"They were like, 'Oh my God, you guys are so hot.' Like, 'Oh my *God*.'"

. . .

SOON, DELANEY AND NELLIE appeared from the basement wearing their princess outfits and tiaras. A videographer called Nicolas came in "with a camera and lights," Delaney said, "but it was obvious that this was not a real production happening."

Noticing their unease, Amber, the young woman at Chris Mark's side, assured them that although *101 Princesses* hadn't yet been set up with a

network, it *would* end up on Netflix.

“What’s the core concept of *101 Princesses*?” Joel asked them.

“I’m the lord,” Chris Mark replied. “I’m looking for my queen and I’ve got one hundred and one princesses to choose from.”

“We want this to be a collaborative experience,” Amber added. “If you have any ideas, tell us and we’ll think about it.” Then she asked Delaney and Nellie if they were “down to make out with the other girls.”

“So this was porn?” I asked.

It was, I suppose, quite a blunt question for me to throw at my son’s friends. But I was scrambling to understand what had unfolded while I’d slept. Joel had evidently wandered into something sleazy and risky. Also, I had that unmistakable feeling of a story beginning to take shape, a mystery that might consume me, and when I’m in pursuit of a story, every piece of information suddenly becomes wildly urgent.

“Not necessarily,” Delaney said. “It wasn’t like, ‘We’re filming this lesbian princess porno right now.’ It was, ‘Are you bisexual? Do you like girls?’ It was testing the waters.”

It was hard to put a finger on it, she said, but “there was a raw emotion aspect” to Chris Mark.

After that, she continued, “there was a lot of standing around,” not least because Nicolas the videographer was performing several duties at once—camera, lights, and, Nellie told me, “cutting up meat for Chris Mark. Nothing was offered to other people. This giant slab of meat, just for him. It was really strange.”

But eventually a scene *was* shot. Chris Mark walked in, and Amber curtsied and said, “Yes, my lord?”

Still, despite that progress, he seemed on edge, irritated that Joel and his friends were observing and asking questions rather than participating in *101 Princesses*.

“He was taking it very seriously and he was upset that we weren’t participating,” Delaney said.

“Are you going to *participate*?” he snapped. Finally, he sent Nicolas the videographer to inform them that “Chris wants everyone to leave. Everyone has to leave *now*.”

And everyone did leave. With the exception, Nellie said, of two young women I’ll call Ari and Mia. Nellie had last sighted them being encouraged by Chris Mark to “bow and call him ‘my lord’ and to kiss each other and kiss him. I was worried about these girls, honestly. I was thinking about what happened to them. And then the next day they both followed me on Instagram, and I was like, ‘Are you okay?’ ”

Nellie paused. “Would you like me to put you in touch with them?” she asked me.

“Yes, please,” I said.

. . .

WHEN THE INTERVIEW ENDED, I stood up to thank them too abruptly and let out another scream. Maybe I was pushing myself too hard so soon after the surgery, but I had a reason. I’d just emerged from spending nights in the hospital, pacing the corridors, catching glimpses of fellow patients—crotchety old men wrapped up in their pain in the dead of night with nothing to distract them.

“What did you do for a living, back when you used to work?” I’d overheard a nurse ask the elderly man in the room next to mine.

“IRRELEVANT!” he yelled back in fury.

I didn’t want to become that man. Plus, if the nurse had asked me about my work, I’d have gone on about it for ages. It was by far the most relevant thing about me.

Worse still, it was my second hospital visit in six months. In January I’d broken my shoulder while arguing with my mother over the telephone about whether she should move into an assisted living facility (I was for it, she was against). Midway through the call I’d gesticulated so animatedly I slipped on

some ice and toppled, my shoulder hitting a tree stump. At the hospital the nurse asked me what had happened. All of that felt like too much to explain so I said, “I fell over.” She slid a wristband over my hand and hurried away to her next emergency. I looked down. The wristband read, in big bright letters, FALL RISK.

“Don’t worry, I’m not a fall risk!” I started to call after her. But she was gone. To this day, if she remembers me at all, she’ll imagine a man who falls and falls and won’t accept it.

But to be clear, I’m not a fall risk. I’m a worker. My father was the same. He owned a warehouse in Cardiff and he’d often tell me that a Man Must Always Work, always provide for his family. Before he owned his own warehouse, he worked for a warehouse owner who lost everything gambling. Which meant my father was suddenly made unemployed. During that crisis—I was maybe ten years old—I walked into his bedroom and saw him standing alone, crying. He didn’t see me and I slunk away, startled and worried but also impressed that he’d gone to the effort to cry in secret so as not to frighten us, his dependent family. It felt like a life lesson: This was how a man should behave in difficult times.

My own son is grown up now, and as I reflect on the occasions during his childhood when, for example, I accidentally sliced my hand open with a Stanley knife and then ran around the house yelling, “IT’S REALLY BAD,” I realize I should have followed that life lesson more closely.

Things turned out well for my father—he made a success of his new warehouse—but that thrum of anxiety has followed me ever since. The looming horrors that await the Man Who Doesn’t Work. Which I understand isn’t healthy, but I know what’s less healthy: *not working*.

Ever since we moved to upstate New York in 2017 I’ve been noticing that a lot of men don’t seem to be working. When I visit supermarkets in the afternoons, the people trudging up and down the aisles tend mostly to be men. The ones with the especially vacant stares remind me of those women from Betty Friedan’s *The Feminine Mystique*, the 1950s housewives traipsing through their homes with a strange sense of desperation, sewing

and baking but feeling like they just weren't alive. Men and women separate in their alienation, but each unmoored from their worlds.

At my local park on weekdays, the people bundled up on the benches staring out at nothing are also usually men. Sometimes I'm one of them. I'll sit on a bench to think of story ideas. But unless inspiration immediately strikes, I'm invariably overwhelmed by a dreadful thought: *I'm just a man sitting on a bench.*

And so I leap up to busy myself in some other way. It's a terrible feeling, that creeping sense of purposelessness, the thought that if I'm not being productive, I'm letting myself and everyone else down. I once asked the singer Randy Newman why he writes songs. "It's how I judge myself," he replied, "and how I feel better." Pursuing my kind of journalism—journeying into shadowy worlds, endeavoring to figure out why people often behave in such puzzling ways, the constant quest to understand things I don't understand—is how *I* feel better. It's the one contribution I can make, and without it there's nothing. I'm sure there are millions of men out there with similar anxieties—underemployed and flailing, looking for something, *anything*, to fill the void, a void our fathers in many cases never had to grapple with.

I was not about to become one of those unproductive men, and so I spent the days after my surgery not sensibly convalescing but instead learning whatever I could about Chris Mark and his castle.

. . .

WHICH WAS, although you'd never know it from the photographs, newly built. Construction began in 2003 and was completed in 2011. His money was inherited. His great-grandfather Clayton Mark had been a Gilded Age steel tycoon—the owner of the Clayton Mark Company.

In November 2021, Chris Mark put his castle on the market. The asking price was \$35 million but it still hadn't sold by April 2022, which was when,

instead of lowering the price, he mysteriously increased it to \$60 million.^[*1] The listing agent John Pizzi and Chris Mark's daughter Christina raised awareness of the sale by giving interviews, laying out the castle's origin story:

“DADDY, WHY DON'T YOU BUILD US A CASTLE?” THE FAIRYTALE PALACE BUILT FOR A 17-YEAR-OLD TIKTOK STAR ON THE MARKET FOR \$60M.



A Gothic-style castle in Connecticut built by a wealthy heir so that his daughters could experience a fairytale childhood has seen its asking price upped by \$25m....

“It is a genuine, one-of-a-kind fairytale castle built with truly remarkable craftsmanship and attention to detail,” [says listing agent John] Pizzi....

[Chris Mark's] eldest daughter, 17-year-old social media influencer Christina, runs the popular Chris Mark Castle TikTok account, where she posts amusing clips about her “life as a princess.”^[*2]

But not every article I found was so positive. Back during construction, when rumors were circulating around Woodstock that the scion of a Gilded Age steel tycoon was building an ostentatious castle on the edge of town, journalists managed to unearth fragments of stranger stories about the place. Like how it had been claimed during Chris Mark's 2010 divorce hearing that one of the couple's pet camels had starved to death due to neglect. Chris Mark blamed his estranged wife and she blamed him—but one thing seemed certain: Given how camels can last for several months without food, that sounded like a *lot* of neglect.

In 2008, Gerard F. Russell, a journalist from Worcester, Massachusetts's *Telegram & Gazette*, reported that Chris Mark had once owned a nonprofit refuge for exotic animals—zebras, llamas, camels, alpacas, emus, and some big cats, but

a former Woodstock neighbor...who wished not to be identified said she was once invited to an “emu” barbeque at Mr. Mark's home. She said she declined the invitation.^[*3]

Chris Mark's “general manager” Charles Cady denied to the reporter that his employer held private exotic animal barbecues. Then I found something else, buried deep on Twitter.

On March 1, 2023—three months before Joel's night experiencing *101 Princesses*—a woman in her twenties named Josie had tweeted: “I've been invited to the Chris Mark Castle and I haven't been able to sleep or think straight for days, I'm so excited and nervous.”

Two days later she tweeted again: “Today is when I become a real Princess and visit a castle.”

“You deserve it!” someone replied.

After that, Josie went quiet for five days. Then, on March 8, she tweeted: “That castle was very pretty and luxurious but truly some weird, twisted shit is going on and I'm thankful I left.”



“So,” I began. “When my son and his friends made it clear that they didn’t want to participate in *101 Princesses*, they were asked to leave.”

“Yes,” said Ari.

It was a week later, and Nellie had come through for me. Ari, one of the two women who had stayed when the others left, was on the phone.

“What happened after that?” I asked her.

“Well,” Ari replied, “first he had us do some dance skits for his video. Then he asked us if we wanted to go to a club in Boston.”

They all piled into Chris Mark’s Rolls-Royce Silver Shadow for the ninety-minute drive. There was Ari, her friend Mia, Nicolas the videographer, Chris Mark, and his much younger assistant, Amber. Like Joel and his friends, Ari and Mia had felt reassured by Amber’s presence. “But,” Ari said, “in the car we realized she wasn’t okay. She looked like she was on something. And she told us she only met Chris for the first time the night before. Anyway, Chris kept asking us if we’d be down to film a shower scene or a hot-tub scene with a bunch of women. At that point we figured maybe this wasn’t actually a Netflix show. Plus, he knew my friend was twenty, yet he was still making sexual remarks about her and offering her drinks.”

Once they arrived at the club, Ari and Mia “didn’t feel comfortable going in. With the fancy dresses it felt a little too much.”

“Oh, you were still wearing the princess outfits?” I asked.

“Yes,” said Ari.

And so they remained in the car with Nicolas the videographer while Chris and Amber entered the club. They all arrived back at the castle at 3 a.m., which was when, Ari said, “things got sketchy. Chris went into his bedroom with one of the girls.” She said a small number of young women were apparently living at the castle. “Me and my friend stayed up to chat with the videographer. But I guess Chris has cameras in his room, because he saw us leave our bedroom. He was really mad that we were trying to get friendly with him. So he sent us back to our room.”