



illustrated by Tanya Lam

France in my Pants

A year in Provence worked for Peter Mayle, so why not for a deluded mother of two with no language skills, no place to live and no clue about how to scratch a life-long itch. *by Jacquie Moore*

On New Year's Day my husband and I made a pact. Rather, I made a pact and he absent-mindedly let me shake his hand for a second before pulling it away as if realizing too late that I had an infectious tropical disease. What he had agreed to was that if nothing miraculous happened to improve our financial situation—specifically, if, following a decade of post-graduate schooling and three years as a sessional instructor, he didn't snag a full-time gig very soon—we would do the practical thing people at their wit's end with two small children and not much money inevitably do.

That is, move to France.

France, I informed him, is cheap. Northern France, I promised, is practically free because everybody else wants to be in the south. Once there, I said, we could nourish ourselves on inexpensive clichés: Cheese. Wine. French toast. We'd find shelter in a drafty stone farmhouse in Normandy; furnished rentals were allegedly affordable and, better still, I was pretty sure squatting as a political statement was practically *de rigueur* in France. We'd raise chickens, make our own Camembert, wear rubber boots and St. James sailor-striped T-shirts. Surely the colourful village-folk would pay handsomely for ESL tutoring by an over-educated Canadian, *non?*

Think of the money we'd save on cheese and not shopping at Target, I reasoned. I reminded him that his fluent French is getting rusty in Calgary. Also, I said, playing the diligent-parent card, time in France would benefit our children—Pamela Druckerman's new book *Bringing Up Bebe* is about how much better behaved French kids are

than their North American counterparts. When he continued to look skeptical, I directed him to designmom.com, a popular blog featuring dispatches from an American woman currently living in the French countryside with her six kids. Her husband is some sort of scholar; they live in an "affordable" home with a name (*La Cressonnière*) and recently bought a tiny vintage Renault for "a small price tag." (That I don't know what "a small price tag" means to these strangers was not important; there's a photo on the site of the kids collecting free eggs from the neighbours, no doubt off-setting the cost of the car.)

In making my case to move ourselves, our baby girl and our three-year-old son to France for a year, I spun a virtue out of the fact that we didn't own a home ("we're mortgage-free!"). In truth, we'd been renting for the seven years we'd been in Calgary because, a) we couldn't afford to buy the kind of place we dreamed of and, b) neither of us was prepared to commit to unromantic Calgary, what with the benevolent arm of academia poised, we were certain, to drop us at any moment into some wondrous university town.

My husband knew as well as I did that at the bottom of my hardline sales pitch was an itch I'd been trying to scratch since visiting France 20 years before. I couldn't have cared less about affordability. Instead, I was desperately seeking a dazzling loophole out of the conventional life I saw stretching out before me like the QE2 to Balzac on an overcast day: paying bills, schlepping groceries, fighting traffic, lining up at 5 a.m. for kindergarten registration next to people drinking huge tubs of sub-par coffee—essentially, pushing a rope uphill in the city I was born and raised in.

Not being tied down by a mortgage or kids in school made me feel as if it wasn't too late to expand my worldly profile, live larger, find greener grass. France—Julia Child's promised land of slow food and high culture—was the obvious choice. (Full disclosure: My desperation to get back to France may have had something to do with a dubious honour I've rarely spoken of. I am perhaps the only tourist in the history of Paris tourists to have opted to spend her one precious day in Paris at the now-defunct EuroDisney instead of at the Louvre. I wanted a French do-over writ large.) In any case, I've had France in my pants for quite some time now. I'm hardly alone.

For three-quarters of every year Paula Kane is a Calgary-based designer and marketing specialist for food and wine events. The other three months, she is a Cordon Bleu-trained, Provence-based cooking instructor and treasure trove of local food knowledge for her company A Table en Provence. Like me—and pretty much everybody else with a penchant for good food, cheap wine, rich history and giant sunflowers—Kane fell in love with the French countryside the first time she visited. What makes Kane's passion for the place special, however, is that she has actually followed through on the oft-uttered vow to live there someday.

"I cycled through Provence 15 years ago and thought, 'Yup, I've got to find a way to get back here,'" says Kane, who was recently awarded a degree from the University de Reims Champagne-Ardenne for her thesis titled "The Art of Pleasure: Examining the French Meal and the Positive Effects of Deriving Pleasure from Food" (tough homework, yo). Kane sums up her passion for France thus: "My soul is comfortable there."

So, it seems, is her stomach. Kane is duly obsessed with the good life, eating figs hand-plucked from trees and discovering perfect cheeses to end her meals. Still, just as Mireille Guiliano's book *French Women Don't Get Fat* promises, she gets told she looks thinner every time she returns to Calgary. That's a sign, she says, of the healthy ingredients that go into the French food she eats. "You can't put a value on that," she says.

While Kane is fully onboard with my little French dream, she is quick to point out the vast amounts of energy, patience and money one requires to secure a long-stay visitor's visa. To stay in France more than three months, she says, you have to jump through innumerable hoops and wade through an unbelievable amount of paperwork. "You need to get a criminal-record check, a doctor's letter, proof that you have enough money to live for several months—and they expect a lot more than what the official website states (the French consulate wants \$1,500 per person per month)," says Kane. There also appears to be a lot of stamping, gluing, mailing and waiting involved in the whole process, not to mention a trip to the French consulate in Vancouver. Indeed, the bureaucracy is so suffocating and expensive that even a tenacious Francophile such as Kane has successfully extended her stay only a couple of times, which suits her as—more bad news—French living isn't always easy.

"It's not perfect. You're in a foreign country and it takes a long time to build friendships. France is far away from the people I love here in Canada. I've risked a lot financially, too. It's not an easy choice." Kane, who rents a guesthouse on a winemaker's estate where she also works part time, lives several miles from the nearest village. She pays about \$1,000 CDN per month to lease a car. Shopping is pricey, too. "You go into a shop to buy, say, a skirt for 79 euros," she says, "but the euro is still expensive against the Canadian dollar, so that amounts to \$120. For a skirt!"

Kane reassures me, however, that from what she hears, there are still afford-

able places to rent in France. During the off-season. Though not necessarily in Provence. Or Paris. Or along the Cote d'Azur.

Undeterred, I send a message to my friend Harry Vandervlist, who so loves France that in 2003 he, along with his wife, Dianne Bos, purchased a 300-year-old home in the southwestern town of Carcassonne. Harry is an English prof at University of Calgary; Dianne is a renowned photographer. I dig what Harry says they love about France. "We love it because when you see friends on the street they will cross to say hello, do the *bisous* or shake your hand, and have a chat." The couple visit their *maison de village* a couple of times a year and wish it were more often.

Harry told me that while the town they live in is part of the desirable south, the economy in their particular area has been depressed since about the 1970s. "Monthly rents," he writes in an e-mail, "can be 400 euros, ish." That's only about \$600 CDN. We could afford that! He directs me to the website seloger.com to see what's available. This reminds me that I can't read French.

As for work, Harry thinks a good place to start might be Berlitz or an international school, although he's pretty sure it's a problem that neither my husband nor I have French teaching credentials. Tutoring, maybe? I'm delighted when Harry estimates that we could live on the average monthly income in his area, "just north of 1,000 euros." Then he adds the kicker, "in a very basic, penny-scraping way—not likely with two kids!—if you had no shelter costs." Um, Harry? We hate to be high-maintenance, but we're fairly attached to our offspring as well as to shelter (in his defence, Harry's likely referring to the fact that a lot of people in his region have inherited homes passed down for generations; *voilà*, no shelter costs).

Anyway, how we'll afford *la belle vie* is not our friend's problem and he suggests we start our search for an affordable place near Tours "or another Loire town near Paris and main rail lines, obviating the need for an expensive car." Or maybe, he adds, "Costa Brava which has sun in February. Perpignan and Narbonne are bigish cities very handy to Spain." At this point in reading Harry's e-mail, I have

to lie down from the sheer exhaustion of trying to imagine a universe wherein "sun in February" and "handy to Spain" are on my list of housing requirements. It's a wonderful universe I hope to inhabit someday. For now, however, I realize my son's response, when asked if he'd like to move to France, is more realistic: he'd prefer to live in a circus tent in our landlord's basement. *Bonne idée.*

A few weeks after we made our pact (my husband had come around by this point; I think it was the thought of collecting free eggs), two things happened in quick succession that threw France out the window entirely. One of them *wasn't* that my husband got tenure. One of them *was*, however, that our very sweet landlords hinted that they'd like to start thinking about selling the Lakeview home we rented; no hurry, but maybe by fall. I panicked: if Paula Kane was right, I'd be knee-deep in *les papiers* by then, still months away from moving to France (she says you need a year to plan it right).

So, since rent for a similar place to what we had in Calgary would be a lot more than what we were currently paying, we made an appointment with a mortgage broker. Anxiety ensued: would we qualify? Did we want to? Our dream of France was suddenly the dregs in a glass of wine that somebody else would drink.



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The other thing that happened was that the day before the mortgage meeting, I saw a friend who knew my secret French desires. She was from Nova Scotia but had lived in France for many years and loved it; when she moved to Calgary four years ago she had to swallow hard. Now, she told me, she's happy here despite the dearth of historic castles and Eiffel Towers. "I realized that at the end of the day, we basically do the same things wherever we are," she said. "We go to work, we clean our house, we get groceries and we hang out with our friends." She admitted that when she lived in France, she never even went to her local art gallery. "Largely, I didn't do all the things people do when they visit because I was too busy living my life." She said what makes a difference in her life is not shopping at the most interesting grocery store but being able to drop by a friend's house, and finding meaning in her daily work. "I would challenge anybody to get out of their comfort zone and live in a different place, that's great. But it's not the only thing that makes life meaningful." The very joyful Julia Child thought the same way: "Remember... friendship is the most important thing." Not France, not *coq au vin*, not even an adorable cottage with a name in Plascassier.

My friend's change of heart (we used to take a bit of pleasure in commiserating about the wrongness of life in Calgary) was reassuring. It immediately put me in mind of the Robert Fulghum adage that the grass is not, in fact, always greener on the other side of the fence. "The grass," he wrote, "is greenest where it is watered."

I asked Kane, who was living out a pretty popularly held fantasy, if she felt satisfied with the shade of her grass. "I guess over time it would be nice to own something in France," she ventured. "I'd love a small place with my own olive trees." Sounds marvellous, I told her. She went a step further. "Actually, I'll know I've arrived when I can plant enough olive trees in my yard to press my own olive oil. My heart gets full when I visualize that."

Turns out we qualified for more mortgage than we thought we would. I burst into happy tears in the broker's office, which I think surprised me more than it did him. I realized then that I hadn't been suffering from wanderlust all these months. On the contrary, it was settle-lust that had given me France in my pants. Pardon the epic sentiment, but like Noah's dove, I'd had to fly, in my imagination at least, a long way in search of land. As far as our prospects of becoming landowners were concerned, Calgary may as well have been sunk beneath the floodwaters. So when the revelation came in the broker's office, worn out by all those miles in the air, the sight of the waters receding beneath my feet brought an overwhelming sense of relief. There are no olive branches in our immediate future, but there is a very lovely fruit tree planted in front of our Renfrew townhouse. I forgot to ask the realtor what kind of fruit we could expect from it, but we'll find out in the spring.

It would be an exaggeration to say that the joy inspired in me by a 30-year mortgage in Calgary is the same as that brought on by an extended sojourn in rural France. I would still enjoy living in a place where conversations about truffle season abound, and *café au lait* served with a plastic-dome lid and Slurpee straw isn't an option. But the antsiness—or should I say Franciness—is gone. I can contemplate France now in a calmer vein; it's no longer a somewhat fantastic escape plan from my unsettled life here, but a more realistic vacation plan (Harry, is your place available mid-August?). In the meantime, I'll eat more *pain au chocolat* from La Creperie (Kingsland Market; accept no substitutes), I'll plant sunflowers in pots outside my window, and I'll give my kids *bisous* instead of kisses. I'm sure they'll appreciate the difference. ☺