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The raindrops splashing onto my windscreen were getting bigger and bigger. The windscreen wipers were screeching and, hands tense on the steering wheel, I was screeching inside too... Soon, the torrents of water became so strong that I instinctively eased up on the accelerator. The last thing I needed now was an accident! Had the elements decided to gang up on me? Hey, Noah! What's going on? Is this some kind of flood?

I'd decided to take the back roads to avoid the Friday evening traffic jams. Anything rather than having to endure those gridlocked main roads and being stuck in the deadly jaws of a horrendous traffic snarl-up! I was in no mood to do my lion-tamer act on the ring road! I was trying in vain to make head or tail of the road signs while the gang of gods up there was having a great time steaming up my windows to their hearts' content just to add to my distress. And as if that weren't enough, my Sat Nav suddenly decided, in the middle of some dark woods, that it and I were going to part ways. A technological divorce that took immediate effect: I continued straight on and it wanted to do left turns only. Something not quite right there!

The place I was driving back from apparently killed off Sat Navs. Or at least made them rather poorly. The place I was driving back from was the kind of place that was not on maps, quite literally the middle of nowhere. That said, there was a small business park, an unlikely gathering of Ltds (companies with limited income) that my boss seemed to think had enough sales potential to justify my trip out here. Or maybe he had a less rational reason. Ever since he had agreed to my four-day working week, I'd had a nasty feeling that he was making me pay for his generosity by sending me on jobs that the others didn't want. This explained why I found myself in

a cupboard on wheels, wending my way around the outer suburbs of Paris, dealing with all these minor league players...

Come on, Camille...Stop fretting and concentrate on the road!

All of a sudden, there was the sound of an explosion... A terrifying noise that sent my pulse racing to a hundred and twenty beats a minute and caused me to swerve uncontrollably. My head hit the windscreen and I noticed with interest that no, your life flashing before you in two seconds wasn't just an invention. After a few seconds of feeling woozy, I came to and touched my forehead... Nothing sticky. Just a sizeable bump. Quick check-up... No, no other pain to report. More shaken than hurt, luckily!

I got out of the car, protecting myself as best I could with my waterproof jacket, to go and check the damage: a puncture and a dented wing. Once I'd got over the initial scare, I felt more angry than frightened. *Damn and blast it!* Why so much hassle in one day? I grabbed my telephone as if it were a lifebelt. Predictably, there was no signal! I wasn't really surprised, which says a lot about how resigned I was to my bad luck.

The minutes ticked by. Nothing. No one. Alone, lost in a deserted woods. I started to feel anxious, which made my already dehydrated throat even drier.

Move, instead of panicking! There must be some houses around here somewhere...

So I left the protective shell of my car to boldly set out and confront the elements, decked out in the extremely becoming emergency vest. Sometimes you just have to make the best of things. And to be quite honest, under the circumstances, I wasn't too bothered about my *glamour rating*...

After ten minutes or so that seemed like forever, I stumbled upon the gate to a large property. I pressed the bell of the videophone as if I were ringing the emergency services.

A man answered in a suspicious tone, that behind-the-gates kind of voice that people keep for nuisance callers.

"Yes? What do you want?"

I crossed my fingers: let's hope that the householders were hospitable and at least slightly helpful!

"Good evening... I'm sorry to disturb you but I've had a car accident in the woods behind your house... I've got a puncture and there's no signal on my phone... I couldn't call the emer... "

The metallic sound of the gate opening made me jump. Was it my cocker-spaniel-in-distress look or because I was staggering around like a shipwreck survivor that convinced this local resident to grant me asylum? It didn't really matter. I slipped through the gate without waiting to be asked twice and inside I discovered a wonderful old property with a neat and well-kept garden. I felt like I'd struck gold.

2

The outside lights came on and the front door at the far end of the path opened. I could see the silhouette of a well-built man walking towards me under a huge umbrella. As the man came closer, I saw that he had a long congenial face, somewhat marked by age. But he was one of those people who wears his wrinkles well. A French Sean Connery. Two comma-shaped dimples either side of his upturned mouth perfectly complemented his other features and gave him a kindly appearance from the outset. It was the kind of appearance that made you want to sit down and chat to him. He gave the impression of having reached his sixties like someone who had just jumped onto the "heaven square" of a hopscotch game easily and with both feet together. His eyes were a lovely faded grey and shone with a mischievous brilliance like two marbles that had just been polished by a child. His splendid salt-and-pepper hair was surprisingly thick for his age, only slightly receding at the hairline, with a fine wave across his forehead. A very short beard, well-trimmed like the surrounding gardens, resembled a set of brackets around a well-groomed style that extended to his entire person.

He invited me to follow him inside, interrupting my silent examination.

"Come in! You're soaked to the bone!"

"Th-thank you! It's really kind of you. Once again, I'm really sorry to bother you..."

"Don't be. It's no problem. Here, sit down, I'll fetch you a towel so you can dry off a bit."

Just then, an elegant woman who I assumed was his wife

came towards us. A frown momentarily darkened her charming face as she saw me in her entrance hall, but she quickly suppressed it.

"Is everything all right, darling?"

"Yes, yes it's fine. This lady has had a car accident in the woods and she has no signal on her telephone. She just needs to make a call and regain her composure a little."

"Ah yes, of course..."

Seeing me there freezing cold, she kindly offered me a cup of tea that I accepted without hesitation.

As she went off to the kitchen, her husband was coming down the stairs with a towel in his hand.

"Thank you, it's very kind of you."

"Claude. My name is Claude."

"Oh... Mine is Camille."

"Here you are, Camille. The telephone is there if you want to use it."

"Great. I won't be long."

"Take your time."

I walked towards the telephone which was placed on an elegant wooden table, above which hung a contemporary work of art. These people clearly had taste and a decent income... It was such a relief to have stumbled across them (rather than finding myself in the lair of an ogre that eats desperate housewives in distress for his tea)!

I picked up the receiver and dialled the emergency number of my insurance company. As they were unable to pinpoint my vehicle by GPS, I suggested that the breakdown mechanic met me at my hosts' address, if that was okay with them. They told me they would be there within an hour. I inwardly heaved a sigh of relief: the situation was taking a turn for the better.

Then I called home. Tactfully, Claude took the poker and went over to tend the fire that was crackling in the fireplace on the other side of the room. After eight interminable rings, my husband picked up the phone. By the sound of his voice, I could tell that he must have dozed off in front of the television. He didn't seem surprised or worried to hear from me. He was used to me coming home late. I explained everything that had gone wrong. He punctuated my sentences with irritated umms and ahs, clicking his tongue angrily, then he started asking me practical questions. How long would it take the breakdown people to arrive? How much was it going to cost? My nerves were completely on edge and his attitude made me want to scream down the receiver at him! Couldn't he show a bit of understanding for once? I told him that I'd sort it out myself, not to bother waiting up for me, and hung up, absolutely livid.

I couldn't stop my hands from shaking and I felt my eyes misting up. I didn't hear Claude coming up behind me, and his hand on my shoulder gave me a start.

"Are you all right? Do you feel okay?" he asked in a kindly voice, the sort of voice I wished my husband had used on the phone.

He crouched down to my level and repeated:

"Are you okay? Do you feel okay?"

And then something about him tipped me over the edge: my lips began to quiver and I couldn't hold back the tears that had been welling up under my eyelids for a while...Mascara cascading down my face, I released the pent-up frustrations that had been accumulating over the past few hours, weeks and even months...

3

At first, he said nothing. He stayed in the same position, crouched down, without moving, his warm hand on my shoulder as a sign of empathy.

When my tears dried up, his wife, who in the meantime had put a steaming cup of tea down next to me, brought me some tissues and then disappeared upstairs, probably sensing that her presence would disrupt a therapeutic confession.

"S...Sorry, this is ridiculous! I don't know what's come over me... I'm really on edge at the moment what with everything, and now this horrendous day, it's all just got on top of me!"

Claude had gone to sit on the armchair opposite me and was listening attentively. Something about him made you want to trust him. He looked me directly in the eyes. It wasn't a searching or intrusive look. Just friendly, with its arms wide open.

As I looked back at him, I sensed that there was no need for pretence. I felt that I could open up and not mask my feelings. My little inner bolts were sliding back one by one. Oh well, so be it. Perhaps it was all for the best.

I told him in general terms what was getting me down, and explained how all the pent-up mini-frustrations that had accumulated had ended up quashing my enthusiasm for life even though, on paper, I had everything I needed to be happy...

"You see, it's not like I'm unhappy, but I am not exactly happy either... And it's awful, this feeling that happiness has slipped through my fingers! But I don't want to go and see a doctor; he'd probably just tell me that I was suffering from depression and stuff me full of drugs! No, it's just this kind of

low mood feeling... Nothing serious, but even so... As if my heart wasn't in it any more. I don't know if any of this makes sense!"

He seemed so affected by what I was saying that I wondered whether it brought back some very personal memories. Even though we'd only met less than an hour ago, it was like we really understood one another. I'd been a complete stranger a short while ago, now here I was skipping several stages of intimacy in one fell swoop, creating a fledging bond with our stories.

The pent-up emotions that I had released clearly touched a sensitive chord in him that made him want to reach out and comfort me.

"Abbé Pierre, the founder of Emmaus, was famously quoted as saying '*We need reasons to live just as much as we need something to live from*'. So you shouldn't say that it's not serious. On the contrary, it's extremely important! Emotional suffering shouldn't be taken lightly. Listening to you speak, I even think I know what's wrong with you..."

"Oh yes? Really?" I said, sniffing.

"Yes..."

He hesitated for a second before continuing, as if he were trying to work out whether or not I would be receptive to his revelations... He must have decided that I would be because he carried on in a confident tone:

"You're probably suffering from a type of acute routinitis."

"A what?"

"Acute routinitis. It's an emotional disorder that is starting to affect more and more people, especially in the West. The symptoms are nearly always the same: lack of motivation, chronic despondency, loss of direction and meaning in life, finding it hard to feel happy despite an abundance of material wealth, a feeling of disillusionment and lethargy, amongst

other things."

"But... How do you know all that?"

"I'm a routinologist."

"A routino-what?"

It was surreal!

He seemed to be used to that kind of reaction, as it didn't appear to ruffle his composure or disturb his air of kindly detachment.

He then briefly explained to me what routinology was – an innovative and little-known practice in France that was already widespread in other parts of the world. He told me that researchers and scientists had realised that more and more people were affected by this syndrome. How, without actually suffering from depression as such, you could have this feeling of emptiness, genuine melancholy and an awful feeling that you have everything you need to be happy except the key to benefit from it.

I listened to him with eyes as wide as saucers, drinking in his words that painted such an accurate picture of what I was feeling, and this encouraged him to continue:

"You know, at first sight, routinitis appears to be a minor ailment, but it can cause real damage across society: epidemics of pessimism, low-mood tsunamis, catastrophic gales of black humour. Soon, smiles will be an endangered species! Don't laugh, it's true! Not to mention the domino effect! The more this phenomena spreads, the more it will affect large numbers of people... If routinitis is not curbed, it can bring down the humour rating of an entire country!"

I could tell that he was laying it on a bit thick on purpose to get me to smile again.

"You're exaggerating a bit there, aren't you?"

"Not really! You can't begin to imagine the number of people who are illiterate when it comes to happiness! Let alone

emotional illiterates! It's an absolute scourge...There's nothing worse than the feeling that you're missing out on life because you haven't had the courage to shape it as you want and because you've discarded your deepest values, the child that you were and your dreams. Don't you think so?

"Hmm, hmm... You're probably right..."

"Unfortunately, developing your capacity to be happy isn't something that they teach you in school even though plenty of techniques exist. You can have pots of money and be desperately unhappy, or conversely, very little and know better than anyone how to make the most out of life... The capacity for happiness needs to be worked on and reinforced every single day. You just need to re-examine your value system and retrain your brain to change your perspective on life and the things that happen to you."

He stood up and went to fetch a small bowl full of sweets from the dining table, and offered me some to go with my tea. He nibbled distractedly at one or two, while resuming our conversation about this subject that seemed particularly close to his heart. As I listened to him telling me about the importance of finding yourself again, liking yourself more so that you can find happiness and your true path in life, and spreading this to others around you, I was wondering what could have happened to him for all this to affect him so much.

He was putting his life and soul into trying to get me to share his conviction. He suddenly paused and gave me a searching but kindly look which seemed to read me as easily as a blind man reads Braille.

"You know, Camille, most things that happen to you in life depend on what goes on up here," he continued, tapping his skull. "In your head. The power of the mind will never cease to surprise us! You can't imagine how much your thinking influences your reality... It's a bit like the phenomena that Plato described in *The Myth of the Cave*: people chained up in

a cave develop a false view of reality, because all they know of it is represented by distorted shadows of things projected on the wall by a fire behind them."

I silently savoured the comic absurdity of the situation. I certainly hadn't been expecting to find myself talking philosophy in a comfy lounge an hour after a car accident!

"You're making a comparison between Plato's myth and the way our mind works? Wow..."

He smiled at my reaction.

"Yes! I see a parallel between the myth and our thoughts, which put a filter between ourselves and reality, transforming it according to our beliefs, preconceived ideas and judgements... And what creates all that? Your mind! Nothing but your mind! I call it 'the thought factory'. Because that's what it is – an actual factory! The good news is that you have the power to change these thoughts. Being downcast or upbeat about life isn't something we have no control over... You can work on your mind to stop it playing nasty tricks on you: you just need a bit of determination, perseverance and a systematic approach..."

I was completely stunned. I wasn't sure whether to take him for a madman or give him a round of applause for his amazing speech. I didn't do either, and merely nodded my head in agreement.

He must have sensed that for the moment that was as much information as I could digest.

"Sorry, perhaps I'm boring you with my theories?"

"No, really, not at all! They're very interesting. I'm just a bit tired, don't mind me..."

"That's only to be expected. If you want, I'd be delighted to tell you more about this method another time... It is a proven method to help people find meaning in their lives again and devise a plan for a more fulfilling life."

He stood up and walked over to the pretty little cherry wood writing desk. He took out a card that he handed to me.

"Come and see me if you get the chance," he said with a gentle smile. I read:

Claude DUPONTEL
Routinologist
15 rue de la Boétie
75008 Paris
06 78 47 50 18

I took the card without really knowing what to think. Out of courtesy, I told him that I would consider it. He didn't push the matter and appeared unconcerned about my answer. The sales professional in me didn't get it: wouldn't someone who worked for himself make every effort to attract a new client? This lack of pushiness seemed to be a sign of a rare self-confidence. I suddenly got the feeling that if I refused this opportunity, the only person who stood to lose out was me.

But at the time, I was still caught up in the emotions of the evening, the stupid accident, the stupid storm, like the start of a bad horror film... And now, a routinologist! I must have been hallucinating ... Any minute now, the cameras would appear and someone would shout: "You're on Candid Camera!"

The doorbell rang. There were no cameras or journalists at the door, just the mechanic.

"Would you like us to come with you?" Claude asked me in a friendly tone.

"No, really, thanks... I'll be fine. You've already been so kind. I don't know how to thank you..."

"Don't mention it. It's only natural to help in such a situation! Text us when you get home."

"I'll do that, I promise. Goodbye, and thank you again!"

I climbed up front with the mechanic to show him the way to the car. I looked out of the window one last time and saw the couple with their arms around one another waving goodbye from the doorstep. The love and understanding between them shone out like a beacon!

With this image of peace and contentment in my mind, I was driven away in the dark, jolting along in the truck that was taking me back to reality and all my problems...

6

I found myself back in the outside world, feeling like I didn't know myself: the conversation had totally unnerved me. My hands were shaking slightly, and I couldn't tell if it was from fear or excitement. As I walked towards the metro to go home, all kinds of thoughts were racing through my mind at crazy speeds. With every step I took, Claude's words came back to me and my determination grew: "Everyone has a responsibility to life, don't you think? Learn to know yourself, be aware that time is limited, make meaningful choices and stick with them. Most of all, don't waste your talents... Camille, it's a matter of urgency to become all you can be!"

During the evening, the thought kept going through my mind that my life right now was just about me hiding from reality: my professional life, my love life... It was all just a sham... It was high time I stopped burying my head in the sand and found the courage to take control of my life. "*Change everything, change everything, for a life that's worth it. Change everything, change everything, change everything,*" as the Jonasz song went. I needed to find the lyrics to my own song too.

As a mother, my life was fraught. The tension between me and my son had been palpable for quite some time. Everything was weighing me down. What with school, leisure activities and doctor's appointments, I had the impression that I no longer had a life of my own or a single minute to myself. As soon as I put a foot in the door, I was swallowed up. My tolerance threshold had dropped dramatically because I didn't get any 'me' time. The slightest thing irritated me. Especially when it came to homework which had tripled this year thanks to an overzealous teacher cracking the whip. Adrien was already exhausted from his day at school and saw this extra

homework as punishment. The problems were never-ending. I felt like I was dragging a dead weight with Adrien. I shouted. He lost his temper. Then there'd be tears or tantrums...

Completely exasperated, I'd leave him to his own devices once his homework was done, and he always made a beeline for his gadgets. I knew that this was the easy way out, but I needed a bit of peace and quiet to chill out for a few minutes. I'd reassure myself with the thought that this was only human after all.

He'd sometimes ask me to come and see the imaginary world that he'd just built on Minecraft, his favourite game of the moment, or a video that he liked on You Tube.

"I haven't got time, sweetie, I have to get dinner ready."

And that's how it was. For the past few months, I hadn't had the energy to show any interest in his world and, without me realising, this was causing a real gulf between us ... He'd go off disappointed and vaguely sad.

"You never do anything with me!" he'd sometimes complain.

I'd struggle to justify myself.

"Adrien, try to understand. You're a big boy now. Things don't get done by themselves! And with all the games you've got..."

"Yes, but I've never got anyone to play them with... Why don't you make me a little brother?"

And there it was, that guilt thing again... Why, as European women, should we feel obliged to have 2.4 children? What happens if I only want one?

Peer pressure... That got to me too. It was always the same old story, people were constantly coming out with snide remarks. "*How sad, an only child! He must be bored to tears...*"

Sébastien had been disappointed when I told him that I didn't want any more kids... Perhaps that had something to do with

the growing distance between us. That and routine. Monotony and everyday life undermines everything. You no longer feel the need to keep up appearances, so appearance simply doesn't matter anymore. You increasingly let yourself go. This sloppiness is right under your nose and screamingly obvious but you just don't notice it any more.

That was what was going through my mind when I glanced over at my husband, stretched out on the sofa, half watching the television while playing on his smart phone, totally indifferent to my presence and completely unaware of my inner turmoil. That was what triggered it. I wanted to get away from this passive contentment where everything was so completely predictable that it no longer had any meaning. I wanted to find the courage to shake up everything that was set in stone, completely expected and conventional! Swap security for excitement! Basically, push the reset button and make a new start.

I wrote a text to Claude Dupontel, and immediately pressed 'send' like someone pulling the rug out from under herself, to make sure I couldn't backtrack. If I'd have thought about it more, I might have put it off.

I've decided to give it a try to see what your method can do. I've got nothing to lose, have I?

Half an hour later, I jumped when my mobile beeped.

Well done for taking the first step, Camille. It's the hardest one but you won't regret it, I'm sure. Keep an eye out for your post. I'll be sending my first instructions. See you soon, Claude.

I was happy. Excited. Worried. All three at once.

I had a disturbed night and dreamt that I was skiing down a hill at crazy speeds, mad with joy, until I realised that despite all my efforts, I couldn't stop... I woke up dripping with sweat and frozen with fear.

I thought the day was never going to end, I was so anxious to get home and check my post. Disappointment. Nothing there.

You're too impatient, Camille! You're not his priority.

The next day, still nothing. Disappointment again.

Ha, it's not even forty-eight hours...

The day after... Nothing!

I was champing at the bit. My excitement had turned into frustration. When was it all going to start? After eight days of restlessly waiting, I gave in and rang Claude. His assistant answered the phone in a charming voice, especially designed to soothe impatient people.

"I'm sorry. Mr Dupontel is in a meeting all day. Can I give him a message?"

"Er, yes please. I'd like to know when my programme is going to start."

"What did he tell you the last time you saw him?"

"To wait for his instructions to arrive by post."

"If he told you that then you just need to wait. Goodbye... Have an excellent day."

When she said that, her flowery tone of voice suddenly seemed immensely irritating. I hung up, extremely miffed, stamping my feet with impatience and ready to grab the first magazine that came to hand and rip it into tiny pieces.

7

Three days later, I - finally! - received the long-awaited letter. Eleven days of patience. I squeezed the slightly padded envelope, excitedly trying to work out what it contained.

Inside I found a chain that I recognised straightaway as a charm necklace. A cute little pendant in the shape of a white lotus hung from the chain.

There was also a short handwritten note from Claude, folded in four. I quickly opened it.

Hello Camille,

I'm glad about your decision to reclaim your life! I believe in you and I wish you the best of luck in achieving your aims. As a gesture of welcome and encouragement, I'm enclosing your first charm in the shape of a white lotus. Every time you take a decisive step forward, in other words move up a level in the change programme, you'll receive a coloured lotus charm. The colour code is the same as the one used for different levels in martial arts: white for beginners then yellow, green, blue, purple... and right up to the black lotus which marks the final stage of change. It indicates that you have achieved all your objectives.

I turned the pendant round and round in my fingers, thinking how much this idea appealed to me, then carried on reading:

In the past few days, without you realising, you've already started the programme and you have learnt the first lesson: never wait passively. You've spent your time looking out for my instructions and for me to tell you what to do when you could have already started doing something for yourself. Remember, Camille: you are the only person who can make things happen in your life. Change must come from you. I will be your guide, but I can't accomplish things for you. Write down this sentence on a post-it and look at it every day:

"The only person responsible for my life and my happiness is me."

Here is your first assignment: Operation 'Blank Sheet'. You're going to do a full internal & external clean. Let me tell you what that means. Internal clean: You need to identify everything around you that you think is toxic, harmful, and stale in your relationships and the way you live your life. I call it personal ecology! At the same time, you need to do a huge 'external' clean at home: throw away at least ten useless objects and tidy, sort out and improve your living space in as many ways as possible. Bring me the photos the next time. You have fifteen days. In the meantime, you can of course contact me by email or text message if you want to discuss any difficulties you are having. I will always take the time to answer you. Good luck and we'll be in touch soon!

The letter slipped out of my hands. That was some programme! The thought of becoming Miss Housekeeping Queen wasn't really my idea of fun. Given the state of the house, let alone my lack of time, I had a long way to go. I'd never have enough time to do all that! I always got home from work quite late to make up for being part-time; and on Wednesdays, my so-called day off, I spent the whole day dashing about what with after-school activities and hospital appointments for Adrien! Claude had overlooked one small detail: I wasn't a housewife! I wasn't sitting around all day doing nothing!

I sent him a text straightaway to express my concerns:

Hello. Blank Sheet too hard. Will never have time! What should I do? Regards, Camille.

I kept an eye out for his reply. It came in an email that I received later in the day:

Dear Camille,

Time in itself isn't a problem. But the mind can be. If you convince yourself that time is a problem, it will be. If, on the other hand, you're convinced that you'll manage to find some time, it's highly likely that you will. Try... You'll see, your brain will believe what you tell it. But don't worry too much, we'll have a good, in-depth look at the issue of the mind and positive thinking very soon. For the time being, see how you get on with the job in hand, a quarter of an hour or a half an hour here and there in the evenings or at the weekend. And don't forget: energy attracts energy. During the first few days, everything will seem difficult, then it will become less and less so. The more you do, the more you'll want to do! Good luck, Claude.

He wanted me to show what I was capable of by turning me into feather duster Rocky? Okay. I'd show him!

That evening, as soon as Adrien had gone to bed, I armed myself for a merciless battle against dust and disorder. On the

way back from the office, I'd bought an armada of big bin bags and all kinds of household cleaning products. The elbow grease was about to flow, believe me!

Sébastien watched these housekeeping goings-on wide-eyed and with a hint of mockery in which I detected a certain scepticism. I really didn't care! Nothing could stop me as I swept through the house, cleaning and tidying like a whirlwind. Well, until I opened the hall cupboard... Lurking inside were piles of papers overflowing from crumpled or ripped cardboard boxes and a hodgepodge of useless objects that you'd only find in a really weird junk shop: anything from a discarded doll to a solar garden light even though we haven't got a garden, precarious heaps of clothes, teetering like houses of cards, stuff that was too small, too big, worn-out, holey jumpers, flea-bitten jumpers, bobbly jumpers, badminton rackets caught in a gym step that had never been used, souvenir boxes with a lighter from a long-forgotten concert, unopened letters from people whose faces I'd forgotten, letters from people who I'd loved and had forgotten to say, a packet of tissues with SNIFF emblazoned on them found in a gadget shop in the far-off days of his sentimental period, a photo of the first boyfriend that makes you wonder how you could ever have been in love with him, an exercise book from fourth-year, a little bag of wedding sweets all sticky and congealed but that you still keep, because well....

I took everything out of the cupboard, and faced with the huge mound of dusty objects, I nearly threw in the towel. But as I started sorting everything out and throwing things away, it was amazing how much space it cleared in my head! This 'therapy by emptying' was doing me a lot of good.

Every evening I gained ground on the mess. I hunted down the nasty-surprises-behind-the-furniture, forgotten nooks and crannies and stuff that we didn't dare throw out because we were so used to seeing it. Farewell persistent dust, embarrassing hairs in the sink, recalcitrant lime scale and mildewed silicon! I took no prisoners and my efforts were

finally rewarded. And what a great prize it was! By the end of the week, the apartment almost looked like a show flat. I was ecstatic.

"Well, there's really no stopping you now," said Sebastian somewhat sarcastically but with a slight hint of admiration.

"It feels so much better, doesn't it?"

"Yes, yeah, you're right, it feels so much better. It's just a bit of a surprise that you suddenly started on it like that!"

What? Was I supposed to have sent him advance notice of house makeover by registered post? Was everything, including household happiness, subject to red tape? His lukewarm reaction to this change irritated me! I would have preferred him to be enthusiastic about it and join in... Why did I always get the feeling that he was an onlooker in our married life? I felt like shaking him out of his lethargy, telling him that things needed to change as a matter of urgency, that his sitting around and doing nothing was stifling me and eating away at my feelings for him as surely as a rough sea erodes the cliffs...

The following weekend, I managed to get my two men to agree to freshening up our living space.

Off we headed to Decorama. I was looking forward to this last step, the decoration, icing on the cake for Operation Blank Sheet. However, I quickly realised that it wasn't going to be plain sailing as I had hoped. We all had a completely different approach. While I was hoping to linger by each shelf to pick out the best ideas, Sébastien wanted to dash through the shop and get it over and done with as quickly as possible. To listen to him talk, you'd think that the first pot of paint that we came across would do the trick. So I dragged him around the shelves, as he sighed noisily and stamped his feet impatiently while I did my best to look at the merchandise with my coat slung over my right arm and Adrien hanging off my left. My son thought it was highly amusing to touch everything, to my immense annoyance. Hot, bothered and irritated, I finally

spotted the paint shelf. It was now or never for re-motivating the troops! I was hoping that the tins of coloured paints with their catchy names would inspire them to finally show a bit of enthusiasm by choosing the colour of their room.

With Adrien, it went like a dream: he chose ‘Young Shoots’, a football pitch shade of green that was perfect for my football crazy son. Sébastien was a lot more hesitant and, with a weary air, ended up going for ‘Iced Coffee’ and ‘Satin Nougat’. I was delighted, and that was just fine for the moment. Getting through the till was such a test of nerves that I thought about just dumping everything there and leaving empty-handed. A man buying some loose screws was holding up the queue because no one could find the right price. An announcement was put out for a member of the hardware department to come to our till. I imagined with certain relish the man swallowing his little screws one by one. But it was the nasty scheming little minds of the marketing department that infuriated me the most, hatching up those bloody last-minute temptations under the noses of kids that are bouncing about with impatience. Sweets, batteries, torches and all kinds of things. Naturally, Adrien wanted something just for the sake of it and set out to prove, rather brilliantly I thought, how useful such a purchase would be. I was torn between growing irritation and feeling quite proud of the obvious potential in his strength of conviction.

To keep the peace, I gave in and bought a box of apple tics.

“Yes!” he said, with the gesture to match.

Finally, it was our turn. Full bags, exit shop, fresh air, car park, sound of the boot slamming shut, Adrien wanting us to turn the volume up so he could sing his head off like a contestant on *The Voice*... And amidst all the noise, our silence...

The rest of the weekend was spent with paint trays, rollers, tons of kitchen roll, old T-shirts splattered with paint, pizza party and camping out in the middle of the lounge. The reward was a brand-new home and us, nostrils full of the

smell of fresh paint, limbs aching with the effort of applying numerous layers, happy. Quite simply happy.

I had a meeting arranged with Claude at the top of the Arc de Triomphe. It was typical of him and his liking for metaphors: what better place to end his work with me? What he had 'taught' me had indeed been a triumph! But knowing how modest he was and how much he always put the emphasis on my progress and my successes rather than his achievements as a 'mentor', I suspected that he wanted to celebrate my triumph, epitomised by so many small everyday changes as well as major successes like *The Fashion Fairies*...

I walked up to the arch, admiring the brilliant allegories of victory at the base. Yes really, what better place could there be to celebrate the completion of my life-changing project and to show my appreciation for all the fantastic help Claude had given me? I walked past the Unknown Soldier with my head held high and eyes sparkling with pride, and I too felt the flame burning within me.

As I reached the top of the building, I looked down at the activity below me, all the tiny dots bustling about in every direction, cars the size of dodgems, people the size of tiny coloured pixels... My hair blew about in the wind and I inhaled deeply, breathing in the molecules of freedom and aspiration that seemed to be floating around this place imbued with history and victories.

Claude was waiting and greeted me with open arms.

"Claude! I'm so pleased to see you!"

"Me too, Camille. Have you recovered from the other evening?"

"Yes, I've just about calmed down. It was amazing! Thank you again for everything that you've done. And when Jean-Paul Gaultier turned up, that was just crazy! I'm still

wondering how you managed to do it. It was incredible!"

"Aha! Trade secret... But, you know, if the idea hadn't appealed to him, he wouldn't have come. The credit is entirely yours. Have you seen the haut-relief sculptures on this building, Camille? They're wonderful, aren't they? I couldn't think of a better place to finish our work. All these symbols of victory, peace and freedom... That's what you've managed to achieve with everything you've done, your determination and all the positive changes that you have made in your life..."

"I would never have done it without you!"

"Everyone needs a guide from time to time, and I'm happy that I've been able to help you..."

We remained silent for a moment, caught up in our emotions as we stared out at the incredible view from the terrace.

"You know, Camille, I like to think that we are all citizens of the world, but very few people are really aware of this. Anyone could become an 'ambassador for peace' just by opening up to the inner peace and happiness that's inside us all and doing what they can to help others. Imagine the impact it would have if more and more people chose to follow a virtuous rather than a vicious circle..."

"You're right. That's why I'm so happy to be back in the right circle. You've taught me so much! Even though your work with me is nearly over, I really hope that we'll be able to carry on seeing one another."

Claude didn't reply.

"Claude?"

His face suddenly clouded over.

"Perhaps when I've told you my little secret, you won't want to see me anymore."

"What are you talking about? What secret?"

"I need to tell you something that might upset you."

"You're scaring me."

"Right, well..."

I was hanging on his every word.

"I'm not a routinologist at all."

I said nothing.

I stared at him, totally uncomprehending.

"Actually, I'm an architect. In fact, the house that you were in, it was me that designed it! I used to dream of becoming a great architect. If you'd have known me fifteen years ago, you'd have seen a guy who had lost his way in life, was overweight, completely depressed and had no future... I was living in the United States at the time, working as a waiter in a pizzeria. It couldn't have been further from my ideal life. It was then that I put on twenty kilos... Food was a way of hiding from my problems, trying to heal a wound that was still very raw... All because of a relationship that ended badly..."

Claude's voice was breaking as he spoke and I could tell by his face how painful the episode must have been for him. Looking tense as he recalled this unpleasant memory, he continued:

"I left France after a sudden and traumatic break-up with the woman who I had thought was the love of my life. She left me for my best friend... A betrayal that completely devastated me. We were both about to start the third year of our architecture studies and were planning to get married when we finished university. I couldn't just stay there trailing around after her. I felt that I needed to go a long way away, as far as I could and drop everything, including my career plans, in order to forget her. An ocean between us didn't seem too far! But once I got to the States, my depression just got worse. I completely let myself go and became grossly overweight."

Suddenly something clicked and I exclaimed:

"So you were the man in the photo!"

It was his turn to look uncomprehending.

I had to explain to him the little indiscretion that had led to me discovering the photo in his drawer.

"Yes that was me. The other man is Jack Miller. He was the one who looked after me, got me back on my feet again and helped me become what I am today. Without him, I'd never have taken up architecture again; I didn't believe in myself any more at that point. He was my mentor, my...routinologist! "

"What you mean, *your* routinologist?"

His salt-and-pepper fringe was blowing in the wind and his eyes sparkled brighter than ever. He heaved a big sigh, then decided to tell me everything.

"Camille, it's time I explained. Routinology as such is an invention. In reality, it's a kind of mutual support chain where success is passed down the line from one person to another: a person who has received help becomes a routinologist in turn and passes on what they have learnt by helping another person of their choice."

"But...but... it's not possible! I don't believe you!"

"It's the truth."

"And what about your office? Your secretary? And the young woman who told me that you'd helped her?"

"The whole thing was a complete fabrication. In actual fact, the office is my architect's office and Marianne is my real-life secretary. I had to let her in on the secret and persuade her to go along with it. The woman who played the part of a former client is my great-niece. And as for the rest, every time you came I just hid anything that might have given away my real job and displayed a few fake routinology files..."

"That's why there was a plan of a house with all the measurements in the pile of files?"

He nodded silently, waiting to see how I would react.

"So you don't really have the qualifications or the right to be my coach?"

He gave a discreet cough. It was the first time that I had seen him lose his composure.

"Yes and no, Camille. Each new "routinologist" has been through an apprenticeship like you have, which he or she then scrupulously reproduces. It worked for you, didn't it?"

I got the feeling that he was expecting some kind of forgiveness from me. I wasn't ready to give it to him yet. I had to digest all this first. He must have read my thoughts, because he carried on talking:

"Don't think that I don't know what you're feeling, Camille. It was a shock for me too when I found out that Jack Miller wasn't a routinologist. I agree that it's not your usual method and it's certainly not very orthodox, but it's worth it, don't you think?"

We stared at one another for a minute. It was one of those moments when time stands still, when you feel you really understand another person and they understand you.

I capitulated.

"Yes. It's worth it."

He breathed again. With a smile, he rummaged in his bag and took something out.

"So now you're ready for this..."

He held out a thick notebook. Inside it I found all the stages of my programme, everything I'd experienced and learnt along with detailed instructions. I felt very emotional as I flicked through pages full of notes, diagrams and photos. It was an impressive collection!

"I kept it for you throughout your journey. You'll find it invaluable when it comes to helping the person of your choice later on. You'll recognise the right person when you see them – a look or something they say..."

"Is that what happened with me?"

"Yes. I'd been waiting for four years to find someone I wanted to help!"

I was flabbergasted but flattered as well.

Then he held out some routinologist business cards with my name on – as if he had never doubted that I would say yes – as well as some fake files, photos and letters of thanks that I could stick on the wall of my future office... The perfect routinologist's kit!

"Go ahead, take them. It's your turn now to pass on everything you've learned. You will do it, won't you? You won't break the chain of routinologists?"

His voice had a note of pleading in it.

I was completely disoriented. He looked me firmly in the eyes. Everything that we'd gone through together came back to me. I was choked with emotion. I reached across and took the material he was holding out. Surely I owed him that much, didn't I?"

The raindrops splashing onto my windscreen were getting bigger and bigger. The windscreen wipers were screeching but inside I felt calm. Despite the rain, the grey skies, the traffic jams and the red pools of light from the car lights in the night. For the first time in my life, I felt totally at peace, "aligned" as Claude would have said. The days when my life knocked me about like an insignificant blade of grass caught in a gale were over. Day after day I was amazed by my inner resources and I felt like I was connected to an energy field that I hadn't even known existed. I felt ready to deal with anything that came my way. I had finally understood how to take charge of my life and I would never let that slip through my fingers again.

I looked at the people around me in their cars, imprisoned bumper to bumper in stationary traffic, all the sullen, irritated and tired faces. I felt like winding down my window and shouting out at the top of my voice Claude's method for fixing what's wrong with your life through happiness. Instead, I just smiled contentedly while I waited for the traffic light to turn green.

Green! I put my foot down and accelerated away to leave the way clear for those behind me, but, as I did, a car jumped the red light from the right and smashed into me.

Cut.

Blankness.
Followed shortly after by sirens.

Oh, a good-looking fireman I thought as I was pulled out of my car.

A few minutes later, I was sitting in the emergency vehicle, recovering from the shock. A woman burst in: the reckless driver. She launched herself on me, full of profuse and tearful apologies, cursing, criticising, berating and tearing herself to shreds...

I listened without interrupting. Even if I had wanted to, I wouldn't have been able: when it has to come out, it has to come out. Neither of us was harmed apart from a few scratches and bruises. More shaken than hurt. But she couldn't get over having caused the accident.

After the usual statement and the regulation police paperwork, we parked our cars on the verge to vacate the road. They would be towed away by our respective insurance companies.

I suggested to my still-contrite bumper car driver that we went for a hot chocolate to recover from the cold and shock while we waited for the breakdown vehicle. She seemed both grateful and incredulous that I should be so kind to her.

She showered me with thanks as profuse as her apologies had been a moment before. I waited patiently for this verbal outpouring to pass: she seemed really at the end of her tether, the poor woman.

We ordered hot chocolates, with whipped cream for me, the little white heap of goo a necessary comfort thing! I noticed her lower lip trembling and sensed that she was about to unleash a torrent of secrets that she had kept to herself for too long.

I placed my hand on her forearm to encourage her.

"Don't worry!" I said to her. "It's no big deal! And anyway, my insurance company is getting to know me by now. I had dealings with them a few months ago. With everything we pay them, they ought to be useful for something!"

Tears began to well up in the corners of her big blue eyes that were peering out anxiously from a wide, round face.

"Th-thank you! You're... You're so kind! If I were you, I think I would have gone ballistic!"

"That wouldn't have achieved much."

"I'm so...so...Sorry! I don't know what's come over me recently...nothing seems to be going right! I'm really on edge, I just feel like chucking the whole thing in and now this horrendous day, it's all just got on top of me!"

She burst into tears in front of me. Something felt distinctly familiar...

I could feel my pulse quickening. Perhaps this is it. *She is the*

one, I thought excitedly.

Was I going to be up to the job? Unconsciously, I sat up straighter in my chair and took a deep breath before feeling for the little piece of card in my coat pocket.

"What's your name?" I asked.

"Isabelle."

I held out my little card.

"Here you are, Isabelle. Please take it. I might be able to help you..."

She took the business card with an air of disbelief like someone who couldn't possibly see how anyone could help them.

"I'm a routinologist."

"A routino-what?"