

Kilometer Zero: The Path to Happiness
By Maud Ankaoua

Synopsis

A knowledgeable combination of Eastern quintessence and wisdom applied to the Western world. The author leads us step-by-step along the path of courage, balance and true happiness.

How far would you go to save a friend?

Maëlle, the financial director of a rapidly expanding start-up, copes with the frantic pace of her daily life without batting an eyelid. Her life is work, luxury and the gym. And her hobbies... what hobbies? There is no room for that in her highly organized life until one day, her best friend, Romane, asks her a huge favour. It's a matter of life or death.

Maëlle is a bit dubious but agrees somewhat unenthusiastically to do it. But something is bothering her: how far will she go to save her friend? Will she throw herself into the unknown? The answer is yes. Before she has time to change her mind, she travels out to Nepal, where the ascent of Annapurna will be a real revelation to her.

Through some amazing experiences full of hidden meaning, she gradually surrenders control and allows the universe to speak to her, allowing her to discover herself and find the path of courage, balance and true happiness.



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About the author

Maud Ankaoua is an enthusiast of human relations. This is her first novel, rich in teachings and filled with hope. It will forever change your understanding of the other and remind you of the essence of your life. Her second novel, *Respire!* (*Breathe!*) was published at Éditions Eyrolles in 2020.



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Chapters 1-2

translated by Janet Lee

*To those who taught me each day
To you, dear reader, holding this book,
I offer what little wisdom I have gained in the last forty-five years
in hopes that one word, one phrase, might make the moments that make up your life better.
Happy Travels.*

PICK ONE: REGRET OR REMORSE

“It takes a stronger person to understand an adversary than refuse to.”
— Sébastien Provost

I flagged down a taxi, and we crossed Paris in direction of the Panthéon. I haven't been to this part of the city for five years, not since my last presentation at the École normale supérieure (ENS). We were lacking resources at the time, so we decided to do some on-the-ground recruiting at the best institutions of engineering in hopes of attracting a good group of gifted greenhorns for the ground-floor operation we'd founded: a genius start-up. I have spent every waking hour working there for the past eight years, hoping for a breakthrough. My role as financial director had quickly expanded to include Chief Legal Officer, Head of Human Resources, Division Manager... I've almost killed myself learning everything I could.

There remained a little bit of time to finalize the dossiers so I could enjoy, at last, a couple-days' vacation. As I did every Thursday, I had left the office early to get to the gym yesterday. On the program: ninety minutes on the treadmill. I spent half of the time dreaming, somewhat removed from everyone else rotating through the different exercise equipment. I remembered with a jolt that I still needed to confirm my last online purchases.

Romane? Why would Romane be trying to reach me so insistently? It's been a year since I've heard from her.

“Maëlle, I need to talk to you, meet me at 26 rue d'Ulm, tomorrow at 10.”

“What's going on? It can't wait 'til the weekend?”

“No, this is truly urgent. Be there!” she insisted firmly. Then her voice softened, something she's terribly good at, before ending the call, against my protests.

I stood there speechless for a moment. I tried to call her back, but her voicemail greeted me instead. I resorted to text: “Tomorrow is difficult for me. Brunch at Angéline's on Sunday?” We used to talk and talk over a late breakfast at the famous tearoom in Rue de Rivoli's covered arcades: our plights, our disappointments, our love lives...our love lives especially! She responded to my text immediately: “I need to talk to you, I'm counting on you dear friend!”

Romane, a 34-year-old Lebanese woman with an imposing stature and position, was not the type of person to ask for help. Her life has not been easy, but every setback has made her stronger, like a more solid bone forming between a break.

We'd met forever ago at Sciences Po. She'd decided at long last to pursue the M.D. She knew everything about me, and I had heard a lot about her; we were inseparable from then on. There was nothing we didn't talk about, except her childhood in Beirut, which she only spoke of once

after we'd snuck out one night. The things she described seemed to me to be of another century: war, bombs, terror... I never heard her talk about her childhood again afterwards. The strength and courage that emanated from her fascinated me. Romane married young, in all likelihood out of respect for tradition. She had three children one after the other, before throwing herself into the workforce as if to make up for the time lost satisfying cultural obligations. The time...she made up for it! Within five years, she managed to land a C-level position at an internationally recognized pharmaceutical company. I saw little of her, but I would see her name in the news. She's been the one to reach out these last few months to meet for lunch, but I've been putting her off—I'm in the middle of a particularly intense period of work myself.

I had no counterresponse. "Ok Romane, I'll be there."

Traffic moved freely. The taxi had passed the Conservatoire national des arts et métiers within twenty minutes and dropped me off at the corner of the rue Claude-Bernard and rue d'Ulm. I was fifteen minutes early, enough time for a coffee in a café close by, and rally from the night of tossing and turning, of turning over and over the reason for this mysterious rendezvous in my mind.

I was the only customer, except for one man at the counter with a glass of white wine, expounding on his theories regarding our president's ineptitude to pull us out of the recession. A young barista, tall and neat, dressed in the traditional uniform, listened to him with disconcerting interest. The aroma from the percolator, commingling with what was emanating from the kitchen, adulterated the plat du jour: Thursday veal, as displayed on the blackboard, aromatized with the off-scent the still-wet bleached floors. The barista brought me my coffee straight away, set the bill on the table, and returned to his impassioned discussion with the man at the counter.

I sunk into my thoughts. Romane had sounded unlike herself. A weekday morning rendezvous was unusual, out of character. What did she have to tell me that was so important? Why today?

9:55. I left the brasserie and crossed the street, autumn brushing by my feet. The sycamore leaves fell into a three-step waltz: my right foot scattered them, my left foot pursuing, then the wind swept them back to me in an endless reel. There was no mistaking the season despite the blue sky in the coolness of the morning.

I walked up rue d'Ulm and stopped before an ENS entrance. When I was still a student, I'd managed to obtain a pass by way of a conquest à la Normale, which granted Romane and I access to the archives for a year: a cache of manuscripts, and incredible encounters! I thought it strange that Romane would want to meet me here, we've never come here together.

Memories of my time here played before my eyes as I approached the black iron gate, when my gaze fell on number "45". It didn't correspond to what Romane had given me the night before, "26". I waited another five minutes, but once it was clear that she wouldn't be coming, I set out for the latter address. Romane was not the type to be late, and couldn't stand it when others were. I saw her raise her hand in a wave a ways away; I picked up my pace. The casual way she was dressed was hardly like her. With the reflective black parka, tight jeans, and high-top sneakers, she

looked ready for a hike in the woods. Also unlike her: the grey, woolen beanie falling over her eyes. I threw my arms around her, and she hugged me tight, as she always did.

“So! Why all the mystery? What’s so urgent that you need to tell me now? I’m here, but I don’t have a lot of time this morning, you know, work.”

Romane listened without interjecting. Her elegant face, her smooth and olive skin, her soft, unwavering eyes and were affecting. Despite the strength that emanated from her, she seemed fragile this morning. She’d plucked out her eyebrows and penciled a line in instead. I thought it a shame, but I didn’t tell her that. In way of responding, she lifted her head towards 26 rue d’Ulm. I followed her gaze: a large grey plaque hanging over the entryway read “Hospital” in white next to the embossed logo of the Curie Institute. I was seeing as if for the first time the massive building that took up a third of the street.

“What are we doing... here...?” My blood grew cold. An electrical charge travelled through me. I couldn’t move, my voice caught. My eyes sought a glimpse of her curly black hair behind the weave of the beanie, but there was nothing. I put my hand to my mouth to hide my open mouth. I couldn’t wrest my eyes from her face. Tears would stream down my cheeks, and still the words wouldn’t come. “You’re as sharp as ever,” she whispered, pulling me to her.

The Curie Institute has been engaged in the fight against cancer for decades — it wasn’t difficult to put two and two together. I called on strength from the deepest part of me to withstand the onslaught of emotion. My legs were giving way, but I caught hold of myself.

“Shit, Romane...you?”

She looked at me, resigned. “Me, like anyone else, Maëlle.” Then she went on to say, her voice sure, “Look, I didn’t ask you here to pity me. I know that you’re busy. I’m here for my chemo appointment...come with me, and I’ll tell you why I called.”

“Your chemo?”

“Yes, but don’t worry, it’s not contagious! Come this way, I’m going to be late.”

I followed her, stunned. Romane breezed past the reception desk. The smell of disinfectant and suffering permeated the space. I regretted stopping for coffee. I couldn’t have said which of us two was the more ill, but for the moment it was me.

We came upon a sort of airlock after an endlessly long and somber corridor, an anteroom of some twenty meters separating one building from the other. Romane stopped for a moment. The chemotherapy ward was at the other end of the anteroom. Light filled a passageway encased with plexiglass, but I felt, even so, that I was walking through death’s hallway. My already feeble legs trembled, my heart pounded harder and harder and my stomach lurched. The first cancer patient to pass us was coming the other way, her head bald, eyelash-less and eyebrow-less. Then the

second, an intravenous drip taped to the back of her hand, breathing raggedly. She gave us a faint smile. Romane smiled back without hesitation. I tried to croak out, “hello”, not daring to lift my head, but the word stayed at the bottom of my throat.

At the end of the hallway, there were two rows of four unoccupied seats seated back to back. I collapsed on the one closest to me to gather myself while my friend checked in with the receptionist Carole. “Good morning. Let me retrieve your labels,” she confirmed. Romane’s enthusiasm and self-assurance was unsettling. She didn’t seem to be afraid at all, speaking as if she were speaking to a shopkeeper directing her to a fitting room. “I wish you well, ma’am.”

Romane thanked her and turned to me. “You coming? It’s a little further.” She started walking quickly down the hallway across from us. How am I going to stand up again? How am I going to find the strength to face this suffering? I was not prepared for this, I can’t move. I was sitting, petrified, nauseous. Romane stopped and turned, hurrying back, her face worried.

“You don’t look well...you’re pale. Do you want some water?”

“No...um...yes...this is a lot all at once, I had no idea...”

My thoughts were confused. A building headache was about to top everything off.

“If you’d rather wait outside, I’ll find you later, unless you don’t have time?” Without waiting for me to reply, she jumped back to her feet. “I’ll get you some water, I’ll be right back.”

Carole came out from behind reception and sat next to me.

“It’s always the same the first time here, don’t worry. You get used to it.”

“You get used to what?”

“To the smells, to seeing the other patients... you learn to not take on their pain. Once you’re able to see past what’s immediately apparent, only one thing is real: the fight against cancer. The only way to help your friend is to believe in her and to give her the strength she needs.”

“I would like to, I would, but I don’t know if I have it in me.”

“You do. She turned to you. I have seen her come in every week for the past six months with the same determination and always with a smile on her face. From experience, I can say that it’s that type of person who gets through it best. We have an 80% success rate fighting breast cancer here. She’s on the right path.”

“Of course, but...”

“She is the one who is sick, not you. This is the first time she’s brought someone with her. It’s important you are up to it, that you be someone she can look to.”

She patted my leg. “There, pull yourself together, she’s coming back now. Be strong, she needs you!” Carole returned to her desk. I gathered myself. Her words had shaken me awake. Romane is surely counting on me—she’s the one who is sick. But why had my friend chosen today of all days to bring me if she normally came alone?

She reappeared, a glass of water in her hand. “I should have warned you.”

“No, no, I just got flushed. Hospitals aren’t really my thing you know.”

I drank the water, down the hatch, and stood up. Romane’s face was beaded with sweat. She wasn’t looking so good herself. She took off her coat and draped it over her arm.

“What’s the matter? Are you too hot?”

“I’m dying, but I don’t know that you’re ready to see me without the coat.”

“But that’s silly, I already see you: you’re a fighter and you’ll win. Take off the beanie and let’s go to war. We’re stronger the two of us.”

I steeled myself as she took off the beanie, knowing that the sight of her without her hair would be hard to take in. She lowered her eyes, avoiding mine. I lifted her chin and met her gaze. “You’re lucky to have such a lovely head. You look like Natalie Portman in *V For Vendetta*! The same smile, just as sultry... you’re super hot!” I put my arm around her and whispered, “Cancer won’t be what will ruin our lives.” Carole winked at me from her corner, and I gave a little wink back.

“And, we’re off Romane! Tell me what happens next.” She slipped her arm through mine. After checking in with a nurse, Romane returned to wait beside me.

“Tell me, when did you find out? How long has it been?”

My friend recounted in great detail the initial misgivings, the exams, the anxiety waiting for the results, the diagnosis, the disbelief, the pain, the repercussions, the fear... I listened to her, imagining what she’s had to endure, when a young woman in a white button-down, Pascale, indicated that it was time to start Romane’s treatment.

“You’ve brought someone with you this time?”

“Yes, a girls’ day, it’s been too long...”

Romane blinked her eyes. We entered a large common room where each space was separated from the next by partitions. We took our places: Romane, laying down, her shoulder and top of her chest

uncovered so that the catheter could be removed, Pascale, preparing the chemo, and me, seated in the chair, feeling as if I was about to faint.

“You were given Taxol last week, today will be easier. It’s only Avastin.” Pascale approached my friend with a large needle in her hand. “Ready?”

“Yes,” Romane responded, her jaw set.

She took a big breath. I did the same, filling my lungs with all the air I could. Pascale jabbed the needle through the catheter sharply, then hung several bags full of liquid from a drip attached to a computer pump, which she’d initiated. “Off you go, you have half-an-hour to talk girls. Wave me over if you need me.”

Romane didn’t seem to be in pain, she elevated the head of the bed by pressing on the hand-held control, pulling from me a tender smile.

“I know that you’re being strong for me. It isn’t an easy thing to see, I know, but I have a huge favor to ask of you.”

“Yes, of course, whatever it is!”

I brought my chair closer to her arm rest and scooted to the edge so as to be as close to my friend as I could be.

She lower her head. “I don’t know who else I could have called.”

My eyes didn’t leave her lips, feeling nervous that I wouldn’t be up to what she was about to ask of me.

“Do you remember when we saw each other last year? I’d joined a team of researchers for a mission to Kathmandu? I was supposed to be there for two months, but three weeks in, I received a message from my gynecologist about the bloodwork that I had done before leaving. The results were conclusive.”

“Cancer?”

“Yes. I was devastated...I confided everything to Jason, an American professor who had been living in Nepal for the last five years. He spoke to me of an ancient Nepalese method of initiating the healing process through consciousness-raising and changing the way you think.”

My brows furrowed. Romane continued, “There are several books that mention the approach, but none of them provide the method. He admitted that there’s little to go on, but that he is convinced that it will change the world. It’s the reason he is in Nepal.” Romane caught her breath and pulled her shirt up over her chest. “At dinner one night, he showed me some provocative sources that

he'd come across, all dating from different time periods, at different points on the globe. Each one spoke of this ancient method."

I slid to the back of the seat and crossed my legs, skeptical.

"No one has found it? After all these years?"

"No. Several researchers have come close, but no one has found it. The most likely scenario is that the volume had been hidden by the Nepalese government following conflicts with China."

I listened, still not knowing what Romane was getting at or what she was asking of me.

"I took to inquiring at the embassy. I had meeting after meeting at several ministries throughout Kathmandu, but no one had heard of the manuscript. But I noticed that many of them appeared distracted once they learned why I wanted to see them. And then... my doctor directed me to return to France to start treatment."

"It sounds as though you did everything you could."

"But then this happened: the evening before my flight, a man delivered a letter to me in the hotel lobby and then ran off."

"This is starting to sound like a search for a holy grail..."

"This is serious Maëlle!"

"Sorry, I'm listening. But, you have to admit..."

Her face hardened, I grew serious. Romane fished an envelope from her bag and held out its contents to me: a creased sheet of paper on which I could read in perfect English: *Stop looking, you will only find trouble.*

Everything she'd told me seemed important to her, but I wondered whether if the side effects of the treatments have compromised her grasp on reality. She sensed what I was thinking.

"I know, it seems crazy. I didn't completely believe it myself for several weeks."

"With good reason!"

"I kept in touch with Jason. Despite being incessantly warned not to, he continued his research. Every mysteriously-delivered warning confirmed for him that there was something to what his sources spoke of. And turns out, he was right. The day before yesterday, he called to tell me that he'd acquired a copy of the method and was prepared to get it to me! As we'd suspected, the Nepalese government had had the manuscript in hiding. The financial sectors at play were too

large to run the risk of disrupting pharmaceutical sales. Bringing out methods of preventative and curative thinking would call the sector's fat revenues in question.

"Hold on, hold on... it would take years for anything to undercut the sector's economic activity. I only just read that the global pharmaceutical industry is valued at more than 850 billion dollars in total revenue...that's four times what it was twenty years ago, and its value only continues to rise, I mean, you know better than I do..."

"Consider for a moment the repercussions on the global economy if an approach was introduced that drastically reduced the need for pharmaceuticals."

"Look, Romane, let's contextualize this. Texts on systems of thought, on visualization and transformation have been around for a long time. Do you really think that *this* manuscript would change anything?"

"If there was a raising of consciousness worldwide...yes, absolutely. What each of us is missing is instruction."

I sighed.

"Sure, okay. But what are you expecting from me?"

"To bring back the manuscript. Do you understand Maëlle? It could cure me!"

"But, Romane, come on, are you really falling for this? You need to trust your doctors and continue to fight. Most cases of breast cancer are cured these days, you're on the right track. And I'm here now. Side by side, it's already won."

"I want all the odds in my favor. I would not be asking if it weren't important to me."

"I know, but I think that you've allowed yourself to be taken in by the stuff of legend, and I'm sure that it does you good to believe in it, but come back to earth. You need to be focusing all your energy on the here and now, your chemo, your rest... help the doctors do their work."

Romane's voice became childlike, "You'll go for me, won't you?"

"Absolutely not!"

"When was the last time I asked you to do anything for me?"

The register of her voice had shifted. Here she was, unyielding, like a lion staring down its prey: there's no chance of escaping. Her question was a fair one. In all our years of friendship, I couldn't think of a single time that she'd asked me to do anything. I lowered my eyes. She answered for me: the *coup de grâce*.

“Never, Maëlle, I have never asked for even the smallest thing in sixteen years of friendship.”

“You’re right, Romane. But to agree to this would be to subscribe to the validity of this fantasy, and I don’t want to lie to you... don’t you see that?”

She looked away. I took her hand.

“I’ll think it over, and we can revisit it once I’d back from vacation.”

“If you don’t leave right away, it will be too late. This is a question of life or death.”

“But I can’t leave right now!”

“Life is nothing but a series of choices.”

“Romane, stop, listen, I hardly recognize you. You barely know this man!”

“The choice is yours.”

Right then, the pump machine started beeping. Pascale was there without skipping a beat. She turned off the beeper, wrote down the information being presented on the screen, and freed Romane from the drip. “I’m sorry ladies, it’s time to let others have their turn.” To Romane she said, “We’ll see you next week,” and to me, “See you soon?”

Romane and I didn’t speak until we were back outside on rue d’Ulm.

Romane insisted on dropping me off. Silence hung between us as she drove for a long moment, then she confided, preoccupied by the road, “I would much rather go myself, but I have to stay here for treatment.” She said nothing then, waiting for me to respond, and when I did not: “I fully expect that the method will not work on me, but I want to know that I’ve tried everything.” We’d arrived. She parked, dug into her bag, pulled out an envelope and held it out to me.

“Once you’ve come to a decision, open it. Promise me you won’t open it until then.”

“I think I’ve had my share of mysteries for one day! Tell me what’s inside.”

“Promise.”

“Okay! I promise.”

I hugged my friend, who held me in her arms insistently and whispered, “thank you” slowly. “I love you so much,” she said pulling away. Unaccustomed to this expressiveness, she was usually so reserved, I didn’t know how to respond. I got out and walked towards the Louvre, the envelope

in one hand, waving goodbye to her with the other. My back to her, I felt her gaze follow me for a long while.

This morning had completely blindsided me. I crossed the jardin des Tuileries towards my office on Place de la Madeleine. It was a little after midday, and for once, I wasn't hungry. I followed a ray of sun to the Louvre's Square Court, then to the inverted pyramid, onward to the Arc de Triomphe du Carrousel and then the Bassin Rond fountain. I was surely the only person there, that day, taking no notice of Tuileries' beauty. There was there a lounge chair, it's back reclining towards the sun, enticing me rest for a moment. It didn't cross my mind to do anything else. I sat down and leaned back, exhausted, closing my eyes and offering my face to the fiery star of milder seasons. The wind was calmer, and it caressed my cheeks warmly. I dozed off for a moment, only to be jolted from my torpor by bursts of laughter from four young tourists. I sat up, looking for my cell, still on silent, in my coat pocket. Thirty-five calls, forty-eight emails, twelve messages, and three meeting reminders. I sprung to my feet and walked at a run from the jardin to the Place de la Concorde. The leaves of the hundred-year-old trees tried to get me to waltz again, but my heart was no longer in the dance. I walked through them with a brutal kick, aggravated. I walked up the rue Royale listening to the backlog of voicemails.

The elevator doors hadn't even opened completely before the receptionist rushed to me.

“Maëlle, the president is looking for you, I've tried to reach you several times.”

“I saw. Let him know I'm here.”

As I passed the first open office space, the Commercial Director caught me. “All good? Is something wrong? Pierre's looking for you.”

It's true: in the eight years I've been with the company, I have never been gone for more than two hours without notice. My cell was grafted to my hand; I was in the habit of responding to messages within fifteen minutes of receiving.

I was waylaid by three more worried colleagues before I was able to access my office. I turned on my computer. The too-bright screen aggravated my headache. Not two minutes passed before Pierre was in my office in a rage.

“Where the hell have you been Maëlle? We'd planned on preparing the presentation for the investors this morning! Do I have to remind you we're meeting with them Monday?”

Is this 43-year-old man, with whom I've spent the last five months considering business strategy for a company to which I give all of my time day after day, really asking me where I'd been? I was entitled to take half a day and could very well tell him off. He had no idea, of course, that the last several hours had laid waste to my priorities. I observed the hive's activity around me, where I had an essential role, but nothing moved me. Only Romane occupied my thoughts, and she occupied me to such an extent, that I no longer knew who of the two of us had cancer.

I broke down crying. Pierre was thrown for a loop. His voice softened: “It’s okay, it’s okay, Maëlle, don’t be like this, you know me, I run hot.” I couldn’t stop crying. Embarrassed, he asked, “What’s going on?”

“I’m tired. I’m going home. Don’t worry, I’ll be here tomorrow, everything will be ready to go.”

“It’s not the meeting I’m thinking of, it’s you. What happened to you this morning?”

“A heavy shock, but I don’t have it in me to talk about it now.”

“You know I’m here. When you want to, call me, and take however long you need. I’ll handle things with the investors.”

I pulled myself together, thanked him, gathered my things, and went home.

The sky was dark and was turning threatening, portending an imminent storm. I dashed into the lobby of my building, climbed the stairs to the second floor and threw myself, hat and coat and all, on my coach.

How could this be? It took all of two hours to derail my life. Romane’s words resounded in my head. What did she mean by “a question of life or death?” It’s true that she’s never asked anything of me in all these years. She has been there, someone I could count on, unfalteringly, in times both good and bad. But how do I drop everything and go to Nepal? I couldn’t even locate this country in the Himalayas. And I couldn’t take a leave of absence from work right now. But how do I tell my dearest friend I won’t do it? On the other hand: how can I possibly accept this mumbo-jumbo? And yet I knew that in her place, I would cling to anything too.

In the three hours that followed, questions that could not be answered crowded my mind. I knew deep down that whatever happened to Romane, I would regret it if I did not go, for her, for the rest of my life. I reflected on the alternative, of the things requiring my urgent attention over the next few days: Pierre had said that he could manage several days without me — it fell to no one but me to cancel my vacation plans. As for everything else...

...there wasn’t anything else.

I was convinced that Romane was deluding herself as concerns the reality of the method and its power to heal, but I couldn’t bear the thought of letting her down. I went back and forth for another hour before accepting my decision. I couldn’t retreat now.

My stomach grumbled: a sign of relief! I put two slices of bread in the toaster, then spread on some taramosalata with a little bit of lemon, and poured myself some white wine. I drained my glass, then poured myself another, and sat back to eat my toast. The alcohol dilated my thoughts, my body relaxed.

I shot back up, remembering the envelope that Romane had handed me before she dropped me off. I'd put it in my pocket, and forgotten about it. She'd made me promise to open it only after I'd come to a decision. Had I? Had I decided too quickly?

If I adhered to the wisdom that it is best to sleep on it, I should wait to open the envelope. I placed the envelope before me, on the island counter, and sat on the stool, thinking over everything once more. After rehashing the same concerns for the millionth time, I reconfirmed my decision: a roundtrip flight won out over eternal remorse. I ripped open the envelope which split apart and surrendered a plane ticket in my name, destination Kathmandu, and a letter from Romane.

Maëlle,

I knew that you wouldn't let me down. I would never ask such a thing of you if it wasn't critical. As you'll see on the ticket, you'll need to leave tomorrow if you have any chance of catching Jason.

Tomorrow?? She's lost her mind!

I grabbed my cell. "Romane, call me back as soon as you get this, I'm ready to go, but not tomorrow!" I looked at the departure time on the ticket: 3:40 p.m. from Paris, Charles de Gaulle. There was no way!

I turned back to the letter:

He'll be waiting for you in Kathmandu, but he can't stay there long. He'll hand over a copy of the manuscript. I've booked you a room at a friend's, Maya, who has a hotel, the Mandala in Boudhanath, close to the airport. All the taxis know it, you only need mention the name.

Take advantage of the weekend to explore the old village. Maya will be happy to give you recommendations.

Like I always do after a course of chemo, I escape to the countryside and unplug ahead of the impending side effects. You won't be able to reach me prior to your arrival, but I'll call you. I'm so happy you made your decision, and am proud to have you for a friend. I love you.

Romane

P.S.: Take care of yourself...pack some warm things, it gets (very) cold at night ;-)

The departure was scheduled for several hours from now, with a layover in Doha, for an arrival the following day at 11 a.m. in Kathmandu. I was beside myself. I tried to call Romane again, but it went straight to voicemail. I read the letter once more in a stupor. What a nightmare! I was already regretting my decision. What sort of mess have I gotten myself into?

I had a hard time sleeping, though utterly spent by the day's events. At 4 a.m., Romane's voice interrupted my sleep, *I need you to do something for me... I haven't asked you to do anything for me in sixteen years of friendship... If I have any chance at all, I can't miss it... I love you*, then Carole's, *You need to be up to it... You're the one that she chose... Such a dear friend...*

Since I couldn't sleep, I got up. There was still several hours of packing ahead.

I sent Pierre a text in the taxi on the way to the airport to reassure him that I would be back with all speed.

*

The plane rose through a thick layer of cloud, leaving the mist, and my confusion, to linger over Paris.

THE EYES OF A CHILD

There isn't any hell or heaven except for how we relate to our world.

—Pema Chödrön

“Visa?” A short, stocky, Nepalese man asked me, swimming in his military uniform. I had a hard time grasping what he was trying to say in his broken English, but I understood that without a visa, I wouldn’t be able to enter the country, which of course, I didn’t have. Whatever use there was in asking the customs officer what I should do, he simply handed my papers back to me and motioned the passenger behind me to come forward. Fortunately, a French woman appeared at my side and rescued me, “If you didn’t request a visa before your trip, head over to the office on the right. It will cost you 50 dollars.”

My elation faded as I took stock of the line stretching behind the counter. It would be two hours before I was able to leave the airport.

I looked around for a taxi. Some young Tibetans surrounded me offering to carry my luggage, but I refused to let go of it. A group of children tried to present their merchandise, but one sharp gesture of refusal was enough for them to take their distance. So much the better! You had to spend ten minutes in negotiations in order to move one step forward or one step back in this country. I was over it.

I saw a group of cabbies over on the right. Some twenty identical white cars were parked in three lines. I presented myself in English to the first, and he motioned to his colleague to take me. He in turn grabbed my bag, which he placed on the luggage rack without bothering to tie it down. Dumbfounded, I didn’t say anything. I didn’t have the energy to fight with him about it.

He opened a whining rear door, leaving me to suppose the venerable age of the car. I slid over the pleather seats, which were overlaid with red and yellow open-stitch wool. He walked around the car, got into the driver’s seat on the right, then turned around towards me smiling. He said in English haltingly, “Hello ma’am, where do you want to go?”

“To Boudhanath please!”

“To the stupa?”¹

“No, I’m going to the hotel Mandala, in Boudhanath.”

“I don’t know it, but there are several hotels around the monument, it must be one of those. We head there ma’am?”

¹ A Buddhist monument. The one in Boudhanath is one of the largest in the world.

I looked at him, perplexed, not expecting his uncertainty. In the letter, Romane had said that everyone knew it. The man peeled out, weaving between cars, bikes, trucks, raising a cloud of dust that would follow us for the duration of the trip. Just my luck: I've surely landed the only cabbie who doesn't know my hotel. His driving was making me sick. I smiled politely, but I felt increasingly nauseous. As I turned my attention to the road, I saw several improbable scenarios go by: to the right, a double-bed mattress strapped on a biker's back; to the left, an entire family riding a moped, the smallest on the handlebars, then another children between the eldest brother and the driver, and then one more in the very back, holding his father tightly so as to not be ejected at the throttle. The pedestrians were risking their lives with every stride, but they didn't seem to be concerned. And there, a cow grazing at the grass sticking out of the pavement, before being lost to the traffic. An old man waved his cane cursing a young, careless, cyclist, who had jostled the him as he rode by.

Several hours, several words, was all it took to throw my orderly universe into a giant trashcan, a dusty battlefield. But what was I doing here? The merry-go-round ride was over abruptly at the ten minute mark. We'd arrived at the famous stupa.

“Go through the main entryway, there, and you'll most certainly find the hotel to your right.”

“You're sure?”

“Ah yes, I think so!”

He tapped on the meter, which had stopped working during our wild ride. He ended up asking for 300 roupies, so about 2.50 euros, to which I complied without discussion. I retrieved my bag, miraculously still on the roof of the car. My driver sped off with a little wave. Jostled from every side by passerby, I forced my way through, dragging my luggage behind me. A multitude of people murmuring mantras circulated around the monument like the hands of a clock, setting in motion prayer wheels and little bells. I watched them, unnerved, then cut a path against the current of the crowd, my bag in tow. Incense wafted into the street from the pocket-sized shops selling stupa, and similarly-themed, souvenirs. Merchants circled the square. They waited, seated facing the Buddha's gaze, for monks looking for new beads and tourists drawn to the uniqueness of the site. I glimpsed a sign indicating my hotel in the direction of a cul-de-sac. I went down it, passing the metal gate and crossing a lush garden, and up to the building. The street noise disappeared instantly. A dozen or so round iron tables interspersed on the lawn basked in the sunlight.

A young woman welcomed me, bringing her hands together, then bowed her head [to me]. “*Namaste! Bonjour! Avez-vous fait bon voyage?*” she asked in formal French with a heavy accent.

The hotel lobby was minimal: a counter served as a desk, two worn leather armchairs sat opposing a three-seat coach, also of worn leather; luggage was piled on the counter's right side. Eager to shower and rest, I cut the conversation short. “A friend reserved a room under my name, Maëlle Garnier.”

The hostess examined her register and responded in English, “Yes, the room is ready, on the second floor ma’am. If you would like to have lunch, the chef will be here for another hour, I could serve you in the garden.”

I acknowledged with a nod of my head.

“Hot water will be available after 5 p.m.”

“What’s that? 5 p.m.?”

“Yes! We heat our water with solar power. We are well set up for it. We can open the hot water taps earlier than everyone else,” she said delightedly.

“Earlier than everyone else? At what time is hot water available at the other hotels?”

“It’s why our guests are so pleased, we made a large investment in modernizing our system last year.”

“Very good, thank you,” I sighed, exhausted. I took the key she handed to me.

“One more thing: there will be electrical outages interspersed throughout the day.”

Electrical outages? Fantastic.

“But don’t be alarmed, they are scheduled outages.”

Scheduled. Of course they are.

“Tonight the electricity will be cut from 7 p.m. to 10 p.m. You’ll find candles on the nightstand.”

I looked at her, deflated. I didn’t know what sort of land I’d found myself in, but I was sure of one thing: I won’t be here long! I started up the stairs irritated, declining the porter’s help.

“One last thing you should know, ma’am!” What more does she have to tell me? This felt like the darkest of nightmares. I turned. With a quick step, she came around the counter and handed me a letter. “I have mail for you.” Mail? What thoughtfulness Romane!

I ascended the white- and gray-tiled steps with difficulty to the second floor. The room was accessed via an open corridor that opened onto the garden. The key unlocked a padlock interlinking two janky rings that nothing but a well-aimed kick could break.

The room was about thirty feet square: a large bed took up most of the space; a night table of varnished wood, three candles in a small bowl; a wicker chair against the wall; a tripod coat rack leaning like the Tower of Pisa; and at the other end, a bathroom that clearly hadn’t been renovated

since it was built. I ventured to it: a walk-in shower, whose piping hung from a wire, and ancient enamel sink on which a wee bit of persevering soap slept, and a toilet whose stratum of limescale would provide any apprenticing archeologist the year that hotel opened. I turned the handle on the sink and the pipes started shaking, and then spat out in fits a yellowish water from the faucet's spout. It took several seconds for the waterworks to find an equilibrium. I raised my head and caught sight of my defeated face in the mirror. The look of me accentuated the squalidness of the room. Nice, Romane. You certainly didn't break the bank, I'd thought you'd do better than this.

I laid on the bed, exhausted. I opened the letter — written in English.

Dear Maëlle,

It's now impossible for me to stay at the hotel to get the book to you. I need to leave today for a several-day's trek through the Himalayas to respond to a medical emergency at the monastery.

I'm taking the book with me. I've asked Shanti², a nepalese guide, to lead you to me. He's a friend, and able to organize the trip for you and keep you safe. He'll come by your hotel the day you arrive and go over the details.

I am sorry for this hitch, but I'm sure that you'll understand.

Jason

But this is a joke! Why didn't he leave the book with his guide? This dude's fucking with me! My anger rising, I jumped from the bed and tried to call Romane. Once more, the voicemail was the only thing picking up. My cell's battery icon started to blink, indicating that it, also, was about to abandon me. I searched for an outlet and found one behind the chair. Happy news: it worked! It took a good fifteen minutes for me to calm down. The weariness of the journey washed over me, and I slept, hoping to wake up to a clear head.

Two hours passed before I regained consciousness, along with the reality of my situation. One thing at a time: a shower, then something to eat. Under the hot water, my body regained a little vigor. I put on some fresh clothes and went down to the lobby. The young woman had been replaced by a woman around sixty, tall, elegant, with long, soft hair. She introduced herself to me in rather fluent english.

“You're Maëlle, correct? My name is Maya, I own the hotel. Your friend Romane spoke of you. I'm delighted to make your acquaintance!”

I didn't know what to say. Before this woman's kindness, my anger faded.

“I'm delighted as well.”

² Nepalese name that translates as “peace” in Sanskrit.

“You must be starving! This evening Karras, my chef, has prepared a *khashi ko masu*, a traditional Nepalese lamb curry. It’s delicious!”

I took her up on it, gladly.

“Would you like to take advantage of the sun in the garden?”

What a wonderful idea!

Maya joined me there. The calm of this place, only several feet away from the clamor of the crowds, was surreal.

“Shanti called while you were napping. He’ll come by the hotel in two hours.” Maya seemed to know him. A raised brow, very much my own look, relayed my surprise.

“Oh! Shanti is an old friend. He’s accompanied me on humanitarian missions in the Himalayas. He was born in Pangboche, a village of Sherpas close to Everest.”

“He knows the mountains then?”

“That’s for sure! The mountain keeps no secret from him, you’ll see. You couldn’t have a better guide. He’ll get you where you need to go, don’t worry!”

“Do you know where I need to get to?”

“No, you’re the only one who knows,” she said, amused.

“Ah no, as it happens...I need to find a certain Jason and I have no idea where he is...”

“Yes, Romane told me, he needs to give you a book, that it’s for her.”

“You know of it then? What do you think?”

She thought for a moment. “To save a person that you love, you must try everything. Everything, no exception.”

“Which is why I came. But I actually want to know what you think of Jason. Do you know him?”

“I saw him once. He is incredibly invested in his cancer research and devotes the rest of his time to Tibetans-in-exile. Since being driven from their own country, they’ve found refuge in Nepal — they’re tolerated, but have no social status. His organization cares for them, and integrates them into Nepalese society.”

“And do you think that a book could show us a truth that we don’t already know?”

“I don’t know. But often the road taken leads to us to other places that we had not anticipated.”

I looked at her disconcerted.

“I don’t have an answer to your question, but if you are attentive to what you hear, you’ll find answers to questions you’ve yet to ask.”

I didn’t understand a word, but I was too jet lagged to make it known. A young woman placed my entrée on the table. Maya rose. “I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal. If you’d like, we could take a turn around Boudhanath before your meeting with Shanti.” She walked away with the grace and lightness of a butterfly.

The smell of the curry, a symphony of exotic fragrances, tickled my nostrils. The Indian dish formed a kaleidoscope of yellow, brown and gold. At the first mouthful, I was lost in the spiced flavors of the Extreme Orient. The fragrance called out to me from the other side of the border: India, my last trip with Thomas, almost five years ago, a Bollywood-esque happiness that transformed into a nightmare three months later. He left me for some dumb bitch right when we were about to move in together. What a coward! He sent me a text, just a text, to end a three year love affair. There’s no good thinking of it, I’ve moved on. Although, if I’m honest, not really...

I looked at my phone, still searching for an unreachable network. Feeling cut off from the rest of the world had me facing, once again, my solitude. A sparrow alighted on the table. He picked at the scattered crumbs of flatbread brazenly, watching me from the corner of his eye. This tiny winged thing, against a backdrop of the garden’s beautiful flowers, and the combination of smells tempered my loneliness. When I’d taken my last bite, Maya reappeared. Her serenity allayed my anxieties.

“By the look of your plate, you enjoyed it, or perhaps, you were very hungry,” she said laughing.

“It was excellent, truly.”

“Would you like a walk around Boudhanath?”

“I would, I’m intrigued!”

Maya walked ahead until we reached the exterior of the hotel into a street lined with slate stone. A crowd of people occupied the site, rotating around the monument joyously. Boudhanath was an important Buddhist pilgrimage site, one of the major sanctuaries in Nepal. It was impressive! The district was home to several thousand Tibetan refugees. After the fourteenth Dalai Lama had fled Tibet in 1959, the stream of Tibetans to Boudhanath initiated the construction of some fifty monasteries and gompas, a testament to the religious importance of this site, a kindred to the capital of Tibet, Lhasa. The site was situated, in fact, on the ancient trade route connecting Lhasa to the

Kathmandu valley. At the center rose the stupa, a sort of temple, the most impressive in all of Nepal: forty meters high, and forty meters in diameter. Its base was made of three steppe terraces in the shape of a mandala³, where the faithful wandered.

In the spitting image of a guide who wished to relay as much information as possible to the group, Maya explained that everything about this sanctuary's architecture was allegorical. The cosmos and the primordial elements of the universe incarnated Buddhist doctrine: the base represented the earth; the cupola, water; the tower above it, fire; the crown, air; and the spire, ether. She encouraged me to walk at the same pace as the believers, as she stopped at one or the other of the one hundred and eight recesses, each containing a statue of Buddha, so she could give me its history. The impassioned presence of this woman captivated me.

“As you can see at the top, an expressive set of eyes are painted on all four faces, a gaze that surveys in every cardinal direction, a reminder to Buddhists of the Buddha's presence and his hand in their lives. The section above in the form of an elongated pyramid is made up of thirteen steps, there, you see it? They separate the hemisphere from the spire, symbolizing the thirteen degrees representing the path to enlightenment, thirteen stages and the ascendance to perfect knowledge: *Bodhi* or *Bouddha*, from which is derived the name of the Buddha.”

Maya took my by the arm and ducked into a building through a narrow door. “Follow me, let me buy you a ginger tea.” We briskly ascended some tall, white-tiled steps up five floors, which led to a terrace surrounded by little conifers where several interspersed tables were occupied by all sorts of customers. The recent renovations were made obvious by the smell of wet paint. A map of Kathmandu and the surrounding valley dressed the wall to the left between two large bamboo plants. Maya indicated our position on the map a good deal away from the center, at the city's border to the east.

“Let's go on a little further! I want to take you up there.” She pointed to a ladder at the far end and to the right, which she climbed up ahead of me with agility. The moment I reached the top, I was struck by the gaze of the Buddha looking directly at me. The wisdom of his triumphant eyes, thirty meters high, went right through me, and his white robe, tinged with the sun's last rays, cast a blaze of orange. I walked to the terrace's edge and looked down at the now-tiny worshippers.

Maya invited me to sit at the table closest to the giant's benevolent gaze. A waitress hurried over to us and bowed respectfully. Maya ordered the tea. The place was full of magic and time, for a moment, stood still.

“Have you lived here long?”

³ A diagram that often symbolizes the evolution and involution of the universe. Many use it as a meditation aid.

“Twenty years now. I was born in India, in Dharamshala. I grew up there, then I married. Salaj jumped on an opportunity in real estate here, in Kathmandu, so we relocated. It gave me the means to invest in an organization I’d founded to aid Tibetans in exile.”

She cut herself short, staring fixedly at the stupa. I checked my network again: still no bars. I powered off my phone, then powered it on again to reboot the connection, but nothing came of it.

“And you, Maëlle, how are you?”

“How am I...? I’m good...”

“I’m not asking to be polite. I do really want to know how you’re feeling.”

Her insistence surprised me. It was surely the first time someone’s asked the question hoping for an honest answer. Her concern for my wellbeing disarmed me.

“I’m well, Maya, a little exhausted from the trip.”

“I sense that your phone is causing you some anxiety.”

“I haven’t been able to connect to a network since I landed.”

“Is it necessary? Five thousand miles away from whatever it is at home?”

“Always! Yes! I need to be monitoring the dossiers that I left in limbo before I left.”

“Are you really so indispensable? Do you think that a several-days absence will be a problem for your colleagues? Is the organization so faulty that everything rests on your shoulders?”

I couldn’t tell if she was being naive or ironic. Her eyes and her voice seemed to suggest the latter, which annoyed me.

“I head an association of three hundred people. We’re going through a critical phase — a larger company will acquire us in a few days’ time. My absence is, actually, a problem... many millions of euros are at stake.”

“Then why did you come?”

“For Romane, of course. I must fetch the storied work, as I believe you know.”

Her questions were getting on my nerves. Who was she to judge?

“Maëlle, if your heart and mind are elsewhere while you’re here, how do you expect to take in this trip? What joy will you derive from it?”

“Oh Maya, back to earth! I’m not here for pleasure, this isn’t a vacation! I’m here for something that my friend asked me to find, and I’ll head straight back to France and resume my life. This isn’t a choice, it’s an obligation, see?”

“Are you telling me that someone forced you here?”

I sighed loudly. “Maya, you’re an intelligent woman, don’t pretend you don’t understand. Romane is seriously sick. If there’s the slightest chance this book might help her, I must be here, right?”

“I agree, but now that you have made the choice, why not approach the experience as something of joy rather than drudgery?”

“How could I possibly take the smallest pleasure from this? I don’t want to offend you, but look around, this place is nothing but poverty...it’s cold, dusty, precarious, there’s no service, the electricity is dicey, the hotel room is lousy! I feel like I’ve gone back in time several centuries!”

“You’re right. The quality of life is very different here from what it is in the West. But I think that your unhappiness stems from another place.”

“Oh really? *You* think so? Where would that be then? Since you seem to know everything?”

“The preconceptions you’re harboring.”

It’s true that they did improve upon the woeful scenery that Maya seemed to see differently. The waitress set two extremely hot glasses before us. She bowed and disappeared.

“It’s Saturday. Your colleagues should be out enjoying themselves at this hour. Forgot your phone — it won’t be of any use this evening. Tilt back your head and take in the sun’s last rays...enjoy the moment.”

I took a piping-hot sip of tea. Maya was right, I would not be receiving any news from Paris. I complied and surrendered to the last of the day’s warmth, lulled by the mantras of the clock-like hive. Birds were singing several meters away in a little tree providing us some shade, as if to accompany those praying.

I breathed in deeply. All my thoughts evaporated, and with them, my worries. I felt good. Several minutes went by; I opened my eyes to an incredible sight: Boudhanath was now a radiant orange in the light of the deepening sun, who almost seemed to be waiting for me to set. I watched it unfurl its most splendid beauty as I finished my tea. The drink’s sweetness provoked the smile that Maya had tried to offer me earlier, though I wasn’t having it then. A rare calm filled me. We fell silent as the sun painted the sky, gazing upon the enchantment from our ringside seats.

“I would like to tell you one more thing before you meet with Shanti. Every moment that you waste unhappy is a moment you will never get back. You know when your life began, but you don’t know when it ends. Every moment lived is a gift that we must not waste. Happiness is a feeling of the here and now. As long as you think of your presence here as a sort of obligation, your next several hours here will be difficult, for the face of the mountains is a giant mirror. It is the reflection of your soul... the reflection of your state of being. The choice to take the opportunity being offered to you here is yours, to approach your time with us differently, to stop bringing who you are, what you know, your culture, your standard of living and comfort. If you agree to observe without judgement, with new eyes, and forget everything that you have seen before, then you will—despite the disparity of this life with yours —discover a new world in which you’ll find a joy higher than what you’ve ever known. The idea is not to stay here forever, only to try something new. Are you up to the challenge?”

I’d just had a rare visual and sensorial experience—of a magnitude that I haven’t experienced for a long time. Maya’s proposition had me thinking. Why not try? The challenge was tempting. Now that I’m here, after all, I may as well enjoy it.

“I enjoy a challenge.”

“Then you’ll have a good time.”

“What do I need to do?”

“Let go of what you know and discover each new thing as if for the first time, like a newborn child, who finds wonder in everything.”

“I think I can manage that.”

Maya smiled, then looked at her watch. It was time to go back—Shanti would be waiting for me.

As we completed our tour around the stupa, Maya suggested an exercise I could try: “Hold your senses in suspension and listen to life purr.” She fell silent and observed. My gaze settled on the different colors, I felt the incense enter my nostrils, I lent my ears, aware of each worshipper murmuring their prayer. I smiled, remarking the difference in me. Everything was new really. It’s true that the place, the clothes, had nothing in common with my normal life, which helped me see them as if for the first time. It was, in fact, the first time!

Maya watched me, touched. Feeling self-conscious, I hastily asked her more questions: “Do they pray all night? Without electricity?”

“Don’t consider things against what you know, forget lightbulbs, think like a bird alighting on this place without any special understanding. Would he ask this sort of thing? No! He’s living in the now. Go on observing as if your mind were pure. Look, without the accompanying thoughts.”

I was starting to realize that the challenge was not a simple one. Every time a thought came to my mind, it was dressed in my prior knowledge, my culture, my beliefs. I swallowed several questions, for each of them would have taken me out of the moment, but the memories came, despite my efforts, superimposing over the present.

Maya took the little alley that led to the porch and then to the hotel gate. She turned to me, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Don’t worry. If you want it, your mind can be trained. Awareness requires only a moment when you’re in the right frame of mind, but to change the habits formed over many years takes, of course, some time.”

“That’s not exactly reassuring...”

“Does your body respond to training after only several minutes? Your body builds on every training session. Wanting is not enough, but it is the beginning of something greater.”

I was indeed so very far from my gym!

Chapters 1 and 2 translated from French to English by Janet Lee janetleemail@gmail.com

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