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THE WOMAN WE ARE

Emma Deruschi

Sample translated from the French

by Charlotte Coombe

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For my grandmother

Marc,

I lied to you. There wasn't any water damage at the practice. It was just an excuse I made up to close it.

You must have so many questions, so I'd better warn you: reading my explanations may take you some time, and you might be upset by them. Once you've read this letter, you can go ahead and cancel all my appointments for the week. We'll get some complaints, but I'm sure most of the patients will forgive me if they know that you'll personally take care of their next session (please take extra good care of my patient Eugénie Marteau, who I think has a bit of a thing for you, but let's keep things professional...).

Marc, I've left home. For good...

I left because I no longer had a choice. You probably don't understand what I'm talking about, but you soon will. Perhaps you should sit down with a coffee, my friend. I apologise in advance for burdening you with this. You were the only person I could tell. It's a heavy burden, but you've always been the most trustworthy person I know. Now, please open your left-hand desk drawer...

Marc carried on reading and then folded up the letter. The mess didn't need any further explanation. She had written it three days earlier. It was too late now. Elisa was not coming back. All he had left was this letter, these words formed by her small, slender, hand. Her soft fingers. He recalled the memory of that hand the way one invokes the saints. Hoping for it to appear. What he wouldn't give to touch her, to hold her close to him and promise her that as long as he lived, she wouldn't need to write that letter? Regrets rolled back time, taking him to the morning when that hand had needed to scribble, on that damned page, the solemn farewell that her unavoidable departure required. In a parallel life, in another universe, he would grab that hand and beg her to rely on him. But in this life, it was too late. The letter existed. And the woman that could bring such happiness had evaporated the day the black ink had inscribed her words of farewell on the smooth white paper. History had already been written; there was no going back. Now he had to learn to part with her. To let go of the letter, just as Elisa had let him go. There was another innocent heart that would need to read those words. A heart that needed to know what this wonderful hand was capable of. The letter now belonged to that heart.

His own would never heal.

The Threshold of Suffering

Could death possibly be worse than this? Elisa was in agony on that mild Tuesday in June. The pain in her back from the last time refused to fully subside. But she could cope with it better this time because it wasn't accompanied by the more intimate kind of suffering, the kind he knew how to inflict with such precision. She massaged her ribs with the little compassion she had left for herself. Adjusting patients all day didn't help. She felt it was her turn to be fixed. When she was in pain, a few seconds could seem like hours. Elisa couldn't remember the force of the fall, but her back felt like it was riddled with spikes digging into her muscles. That evening she'd felt like she was dissolving. Silently dissolving so as not to wake her daughter, Lucie. The pain itself no longer mattered. She was going to leave. Was it a relief? Glimpsing an end often was. She glanced at her watch. Eugénie Marteau, her favourite patient, was about to arrive. She was incredibly punctual, as most old ladies are. Sitting at her desk, Elisa twisted round in her chair so that the top of her spine cracked. What had it been like before the first shouts? Before the first slap? The days of tenderness were long gone. They had dissolved too. She had a talent for aggravating her husband, Loïc, and she blamed herself for getting him into his states. She'd really tried to be better: to be smarter, prettier, but she hadn't succeeded. She was never enough; she never did the right thing. Yet some part of Elisa, the purest part of her being, the part he could never reach, knew that she did not deserve this.

She shook her head. There was no point thinking about it now. Eugénie, her first patient on Tuesdays, would be there in five minutes. Eugénie Marteau was very elegant. She loved to cover her wispy, swan-white hair with hats of all shapes and sizes: big or small, straw or felt, feathers or polka dots, with or without a brim. Lucie had met her at the practice and called her, in that wonderfully innocent language of childhood, the "Hat Lady". The said lady had found this charming and declared that Elisa had brought the most exquisite child into the world. Elisa had laughed to mask her concern. Wasn't that what all parents wanted to hear about their offspring?

Lucie was wonderful, but she hadn't been herself for a while now. Her teacher called Elisa often. Lucie was starting to behave oddly. She was quieter. Refusing to play with her friends and sometimes retreating into stubborn, lengthy silences. Once, she even hit the little Dubois boy. Of course, this kind of behaviour wasn't to be encouraged. But Lucie had only done it in retaliation. After all, he had called her a fat, smelly-bum pig four times in one day. They were only three years old. Lucie was in tears when Elisa picked her up that day. She sobbed long and hard, and even though Elisa was angry at what her daughter had done, she couldn't bring herself to be hard on her. It was Elisa's fault more than anyone else's. And Loïc's. His even more so. First, Elisa had comforted Lucie, bought her some sweets, and taken her to see the ducks in the park, before having a talk with her. Lucie hugged her, gurgling poorly articulated apologies in between tearful hiccups. Elisa told her it was alright and made her promise not to tell Daddy. It had to remain a secret between her and Mummy. A secret to be buried, far from her child's mind. Far from danger. Elisa herself had dug so many

trenches that she could no longer navigate them. What would she become once she belonged to herself again? She was deep in thought, mechanically tidying her office and dreaming about a cigarette, even though she hadn't smoked since she got pregnant four years earlier. She tidied up her desk, sorted out the scattered papers and straightened the soft armchairs where she asked her patients to sit at the beginning and end of each session. Tidying calmed her. Mess made her anxious. It hadn't always been like that. In a different time, she had been hectic, chaotic, untidy. These character traits used to make her friends laugh, and her sister and mother roll their eyes. She would often make fun of Cécile, her older sister by almost two years, who was extremely meticulous. To her, order and tidiness were like an art form. But Loïc could not stand mess, and whatever Loïc liked or disliked was law in his kingdom. Elisa was nothing. Neither queen nor peasant. She was simply an extension of everything he demanded. No more, no less.

He had been raised by a mother who he held up as a paragon of perfection. Elisa was aware that in his eyes, she was no match for the woman who had brought up her three boys on her own, after her husband died. Their mother had sacrificed everything for them. Her life as a woman, her smile, her health. Elisa found it hard to manage a family even just with one child. She forgot so many things, her daughter's snacks, for example. Sometimes it slipped her mind to put them in her bag. By the time she realised, it was often too late. Clouds of guilt and anxiety hung over her constantly. She silently prayed that Lucie wouldn't tell her father. Loïc's mother would never have forgotten a single snack. She got her children's things ready for them in the morning before school, and each of them had their own personalized meal in the evening if her dinner plans did not suit the despotic palates of her little darlings. She swelled with pride over her sons' success. Especially Loïc, her little prodigy, her intellectual, who graduated at the top of his medical school class and pursued a brilliant career as an orthopaedic surgeon. Every week, the proud, haughty queen of the Sunday lunch table gazed out lovingly at each of her success stories. Until last year. She passed away in the soft light of a May morning. Carried off by time, the one thing she could not control. Her sons struggled to get over her death. Loïc even more so than the others. Always his mother's favourite. Elisa refrained from making fun of him, even gently. Gentleness, tenderness, and teasing had no place between them anymore. The trap had closed, shutting all of that out. Every so often, those things crept back in. For a few weeks, a few days, a few hours. Each time more fleeting than the last.

Through the open window the noise of the endless flow of cars around Place de la Nation could be heard. And so many horns honking. Sometimes sirens. Voices. She liked these noises. They added colour to the deafening din of her unspoken thoughts. But she shut the window anyway. Eugénie was quite sensitive to the cold, even if she was reluctant to admit it. There was a soft knock at the door. She heard her patient's low-heeled shoes clacking across the floor. The partition to her office slid open to reveal a frail, elderly woman with a purple hat perched on top of her head, a few white curls escaping from beneath the brim, and a smile on her lips painted in rosewood pink.

'Hello Elisa, darling. Why are you looking so glum on such a glorious day? Give me a smile! How's my Lulu Kangaroo?'

Eugénie invariably dished out an order of some kind when she arrived, usually accompanied by a peck on the cheek as she asked after Lucie.

‘Hi Eugénie. You’re looking very chic. Lulu’s fine, but I wouldn’t recommend talking to her about kangaroos. Her latest thing is cows; she’s obsessed with them.’

Eugénie Marteau was intuitive, but not omniscient. She always insisted on scrutinising Elisa closely. She was peering at her now.

‘You’re very pale.’

‘And your hip is still tilting. I noticed it as soon as you came in. So, how’s your back? And your fingers?’

Her arthritis wasn’t getting any better. The affliction of old age. As a physiotherapist, Elisa had seen it all, of course. But today Eugénie was in pain; she could tell from her gait, which was less confident than usual.

‘Pretty awful. Of course, I am eighty-four. You can’t expect things to get any better! You’ll see what I mean in fifty years. That’s the terrible thing about being old: you’ve watched the years go by and you end up missing the things you didn’t fully appreciate before. It’s painful and cruel.’

She grumbled about her age and moaned about her various aches and pains, but without ever blaming whoever was listening. Always concerned about others, she was just a born grumbler, Elisa had realised. Age had nothing to do with it.

Elisa was surprised to find herself thinking that she’d have loved to be like her. So free. Like she had been once herself. Like before, in those blissful days filled with little joys that passed by unnoticed until they were gone: sleeping in, laughing loudly, disagreeing, putting things off until tomorrow. Living.

‘Are you ready for the manipulations? I’m going to get you to do some exercises before the massage. Firstly, if you could take off your tights, please.’

Eugénie gave her a knowing but slightly mischievous look.

‘I know the drill, dear. Be gentle with me, I beg you. I’m having dinner with my granddaughter Jeanne tonight, and I need to be steady on my feet.’

How could she have known that right now, gentleness was more essential to Elisa than anything else? The more she distanced herself from her life, the more gentleness she needed.

Jeanne

She woke up in a bad mood. Friday was here, but it didn't bring her any peace. If anything, its arrival meant that she had to start over. Again.

Jeanne yawned, banging her fist on the duvet. Where could she find some comfort? Last Tuesday's dinner with her grandmother Eugénie, after her physiotherapy appointment, had been depressing. Jeanne hadn't dared to confide in her. She wanted to crawl into bed, into that soft cocoon, and stay there until the urge to scream passed. Until the world forgot about her, and she forgot about the creeping masses who were desperately trying to get under her skin. It was painful. Her latest product placement on YouTube had generated an outpouring of hate. A collective, anonymous rage had been unleashed against her. She'd received a torrent of abusive comments, ridicule, and threats of death and rape.

Her friends, keyboard warriors themselves, had urged her to post a video about the abuse she'd been experiencing for over a week. Jeanne, on the other hand, just wanted the knot in her stomach that was making it hard to breathe to go away. She had taken up biting her nails again because of the abusive messages she received every day; a bad habit of hers. She had fucked up. Undeniably. But that didn't justify the abuse she was getting. Of course, she'd lodged a complaint against the most savage ones, had installed an app that blocked the vilest comments, and would be taking legal action against the people who continued to hound her. Every day Jeanne received dozens of pornographic video clips with her face photoshopped into them. The tragedy was that she could not bring herself to log off. She needed to see what people were saying about her and, more importantly, to defend herself. Four years after starting her YouTube channel, and at the age of just twenty-two, she'd learned to ignore the criticism. Or so she thought. Until a wave of it washed over her. Until she was criticized for existing, for living.

She resisted the urge to pick up her phone and scroll through the barrage of insults she'd received during the night. First, coffee. A nice hot coffee before she took on the world. She hauled herself out of bed and came face-to-face with her reflection. She suddenly became aware of the extra exercise in vanity she was subjecting herself to, from the minute she opened her eyes.

Who could she turn to? Her parents were already freaking out, and this would just be yet another thing for them to argue about. She couldn't stress them out even more. How had everything gotten so bad?

She sipped her coffee in silence. She couldn't wait any longer. She grabbed her phone and opened Twitter, determined to respond to the most hateful comments. But her resolve quickly drained away when she read the first tweet: *"Fat bitch, you better hope I don't run into your disgusting face on the street. If I do, I'll kill you"*. From an anonymous account, created solely to spread hate. As usual. She sighed, and feeling utterly powerless, threw her phone on her bed and burst into tears. Jeanne hadn't meant to hurt anyone when she agreed to partner with that brand of diet pills which, theoretically, were supposed to aid weight loss. She'd

tried them herself and they'd had no effect. She couldn't have known that someone would end up in hospital completely dehydrated following major intestinal problems caused by taking the pills. Jeanne had been in touch with the young woman, who was getting better and was suing the brand, even though she didn't blame Jeanne. Jeanne didn't even know what to say. She hadn't been honest, and she had no excuse. She had recommended a product without making sure there were no risks. And she had lied. Other YouTubers had picked up on the scandal and commented on it in their own videos. These videos didn't mention Jeanne by name but warned subscribers about "hypocrite influencers" who wanted to harm them. She should have been smarter. Less thoughtless, as her mother would say.

Ariana Grande's *No Tears Left to Cry* starts playing. Her phone. Eugénie, her grandma. She answers.

'Hello, my love. How are you? Listen, I'm in the 11th. I've got a couple of hours before my physio appointment. Shall we have a coffee?'

'I'll be there, Nana. Our usual bistro, twenty minutes.'

Seeing her grandmother would do her good. A grandmother is a haven of peace. An island far away from the world, but close to oneself. Together, they had a kind of ritual. They would always meet before Grandma Génie's appointment with her physiotherapist, Elisa. Jeanne pulled on a pair of basic jeans and a black top and slipped into a pair of trainers on her way out. She didn't put on any make-up. She didn't do her hair either. She knew she would still look good. She grabbed a cap and pulled it firmly down on her head.

As she hurtled down the stairs of her building, she thought about how, for many people, the pill scandal had just been an excuse. An excuse to humiliate her, to insult her. To tear her down. The proof: the insults were predominantly about her looks. Dozens of web articles, for which she was normally extremely grateful as long as they gave her publicity, now bore the headlines: *Scams, dangerous product placement, cosmetic surgery and Photoshop: Jeanne Montet caught up in her lies?!*

She'd had a nose job, it's true. She had said it was for health reasons. She had lied. She had then discreetly had hyaluronic acid fillers injected to reduce her dark circles, to lift her eyebrows and to erase the two lines that ran from her nose to the corner of her lips. Her mother went ballistic when she saw it. Grandma Génie said nothing. She didn't need to; it was clear she disapproved. Jeanne had reacted to this pressing need to conceal her hang-ups. She could no longer bear being imperfect compared to others. She had always denied it. And now she was being accused of being a fraud, a fake. They made fun of her shallowness. But what did they know? Did they understand what it was like to be completely exposed, day and night, constantly having to deal with comments about her looks? She wasn't comfortable in her own skin, and the nose job had helped, but her quest for wellbeing had now become more like a frantic race for perfection. She thought about the fortune she'd spent on preventing cellulite from taking hold. The things she had deprived herself of. All those

meals wasted through guilt and self-denial. Of course, she was an advocate of the “body positive” movement, but putting on even a pound herself was not an option.

She compared herself so much to other women, trying to find comfort in it, but failing. She’d have loved to have the confidence to keep her crooked nose and maybe even to learn to love it. But fuck! She just couldn’t do it. Jeanne was aware of how much of an obsession she had with perfect female physical beauty. She was valued for it. And she sought validation through it. A right to exist. She admired women who had freed themselves from these concerns, and she hated herself even more for not being able to.

She met her grandmother in their favourite bistro, a café on Rue de Montreuil, near Place de la Nation. She hugged her tightly, intoxicated by the scent of honeysuckle that reminded her of the Wednesday afternoon tea parties of her childhood, and took in her hat of the day. It had a green bow around it that matched the belt which adorned her black jumpsuit. Her grandma always looked so classy. They ordered two coffees and looked at each other, smiling. Jeanne adored her grandma. For over an hour they chatted away about this and that. Her grandmother told her about one of the times she’d ended up in police custody, when she was thirty-four. The police had arrested her during a protest against the construction of a nuclear power station in the Ain region. She had figured out very early on in life who she was, and had always proudly stood up for what she believed in. Strong. Confident. Different from Jeanne. Eugénie fell silent. She took Jeanne’s hand and kissed it fondly.

‘Well, my dear, I’m not going to beat about the bush. Your parents told me about this online thing. I went on the Internet. I don’t understand Twitter, but I know it’s a load of rubbish. Switch off that nonsense on your phone for me.’

Jeanne remained silent. Her grandmother didn’t understand. Twitter couldn’t be turned off. With or without her, the storm would continue to rage. She might as well be there to witness it. As if to contradict her, and as if she’d read her mind, her grandmother said, ‘You can’t stop anyone from talking. You’ll never have that power.’

Her grandmother explained that there would always be someone who thought Jeanne wasn’t enough, that she could never know all the things that were said about her. If only she knew. Her grandmother had only a vague idea of everything that was being said. But having Grandma Génie remind her what the world was like drained what little hope she had left.

‘That’s just the way it is, dear. Sometimes not being there is a way of protecting yourself.’

‘Oh, thanks Grandma. That’s great, I guess now I’ll just leave it all up to fate then!’

Her grandmother usually managed to cheer her up. Like when she was little, and her mother would tell her off for not being well behaved enough at the table when they had guests. Grandma Génie would give her a sly kick under the table and stick her tongue out at her to make her smile. Just as these fond memories came back to her, her grandmother nudged her calf with the toe of her shoe, forcing Jeanne to look at her:

‘What I want you to understand is that you shouldn’t try to control things that you can’t.’

Her grandmother gently stroked her hand. Other people’s opinions, their hatred, their fear: none of that could be controlled. According to her, those who thought otherwise were seriously deluding themselves.

‘With or without us, the world goes on turning, my dear. Your power lies only in your own reactions.’

Jeanne was still silent, but it would take more than that to discourage Grandma Génie.

‘The most important thing for you to remember is that you don’t have to accept or put up with the violence imposed on you. You can defend yourself, but you also have the right to get on with your life, leave this social network and refuse to be part of this madness. It’s up to you.’

Jeanne was nibbling her nails. Her grandmother was right. She plucked up the courage to delete the Twitter app from her phone. She turned off all her social media notifications and threw her phone into the bottom of her bag.

‘Thanks, Grandma.’

‘You’re welcome, dear.’

‘Come on, I’ll walk you to the physio.’

She liked going there. Admittedly, more for seeing the handsome Marc, who worked with her grandmother’s physiotherapist Elisa, than for the pleasure of the walk there alone.

‘Oh no, don’t worry, sweetheart. Let’s just go to the end of street together and then you can get on with your day.’

They walked along arm in arm, discussing the latest antics of Madame Moulin, Grandma Génie’s eccentric neighbour, who, although much younger than her, had gone batty a long time ago and was convinced that the whole world was spying on her when she was in her kitchen. Her grandmother stopped suddenly and rummaged around frantically in her bag. Jeanne heard:

‘HEYA OLD LADY! So cool that you’re here. Come and give Doggy a kiss.’

She looked up and saw her grandmother walking over to a girl with a face full of piercings, her bright blue hair pulled back in a ponytail, and shaved up the back of her neck. The young woman wore red and black checked trousers, a microscopic top in an even more blinding fabric, and platform shoes with soles so thick

she looked like she'd knock someone out with just one kick. She was sitting on the ground, leaning against a shopfront, with a dog by her side. Jeanne's grandmother handed her a banknote and talked to her for a few minutes. The girl met Jeanne's gaze, looked her up and down, and with her voice filled with hatred, said, 'What's your problem, bitch? Never seen a hobo before? There's no shortage of them round here.'

'No, I... I'm with my grandmother. That's her.'

'Yes, Lénita, calm down. This is my granddaughter. This is Jeanne.'

'Ah... Hi Jeanne. Sorry, eh. I'm just sick of girls like you looking down on me. Don't take it personally.'

'No, no, don't worry. I get it.'

'Really? You get it...?'

The girl roared with laughter and Doggy started barking, as if to join in. Lénita calmed him with a pat on the head.

'Man, you make me and Doggy laugh.'

Jeanne smiled stupidly, unable to think of anything clever to add. Something knotted in her stomach as she stood there watching Lénita stroke her dog almost serenely.

Grandma Génie took her hand, snapping her out of her thoughts.

'Lénita, we have to leave you, so I can go and get my bones knocked about by my physio. Take care of yourself. I'll come and see you again soon.'

'OK, say hi to Delattre. I haven't seen her in a couple of days. Since Tuesday night, I think.'

So, Elisa Delattre, the petite physio her grandmother was so fond of, also knew Lénita, who was also one of her fans. Jeanne liked Elisa too. When her grandmother liked someone, Jeanne couldn't bring herself to feel otherwise. Grandma Génie promised Lénita she'd pass on the message. After they said goodbye to her, Jeanne followed her grandmother, intrigued.

'How do you know that girl, Nana?'

'She's been there a year or two. She refuses to talk about what happened to her. She says: "Stop asking questions. Tell yourself I'm a drug addict just trying to make enough cash for the night." But I don't think she's on drugs. She wants to make us uncomfortable. It's easier for her than being pitied.'

Something shifted abruptly in Jeanne. Her own problems suddenly seemed stupid and shallow. Like her.

She walked as far as the street corner with her grandmother, who then gently cupped her face in her hands and said, 'I can see something's bothering you.'

Tears sprung to her eyes.

‘Yes. I’m wondering... I don’t know... Who am I? How do I find out where life is taking me?’

‘It seems to me that answer is within your reach, sweetheart. Start by answering this question: who are you when you stop asking yourself whether you are “enough”? When you decide that you are enough, just as you are? And if you want to know where life is taking you, Jeanne, you must never put your head down or look away, even if it seems more comfortable at the time. Act. Change what’s bothering you.’

Her grandmother walked away without a backwards glance. Jeanne stood still for a few minutes, her eyes fixed on Eugénie’s tiny figure, hurrying along so as not to be late. Then, when the figure disappeared from sight, Jeanne turned to head home. Her grandmother had hit home with what she said, straight to the heart. She no longer wanted to be an aimless creature. Not the monster that some people wanted to make her out to be, nor the target that others were trying to destroy. She would hold her head up high and stop thinking that a new situation might emerge from her old behaviours.

Going back the way she came, she passed Lénita and Doggy again. She hesitated for a moment and just stood there, arms dangling by her sides, looking at the girl’s bluish hair, at her ring-studded features that were even younger than her own, and at her disproportionately large shoes. Lénita looked back at her with a questioning expression.

‘Something wrong, hun?’

‘No, I was just wondering if you needed anything?’

‘Yeah, a sick south-facing apartment and a job that pays enough to live a good life. Food for starters. Then a motorbike. Well, the motorbike would just be the cherry on top actually, I don’t really need it. You got all that?’

Lénita leisurely rolled her cigarette, looking at Jeanne with a slight smile dancing on her lips. Jeanne gave a little nervous laugh and replied, ‘I’ve got ten euros if you want...’

Lénita’s hoots of laughter were accompanied by the barks of Doggy, who was having the time of his life. She looked at Jeanne for a few seconds and then held out her hand to accept the ten euro note Jeanne had taken out of her bag.

‘Thank you,’ she said. ‘You’ve done your good deed for the day, hun... You can tick the box: “Gave money to a homeless person, so I can sleep easy”.’

Jeanne nodded. Had she been too arrogant? She didn’t want Lénita to think she was doing it out of guilt or self-centredness. Lénita must have sensed her unease.

‘Don’t look like that, I’m just kidding. I’m a bit of a joker sometimes, it gets me through the day. I’m sorry about earlier, I was rude, you’re actually a pretty cool girl.’

‘Oh, you think so?’

Lénita shrugged.

‘If you’re anything like your old grandma, then you must be nice.’

‘You’re nice too.’

Lénita roared with laughter again. ‘You really crack me and Doggy up.’

Jeanne laughed too. She didn’t know what to say or how to take it, but she was enjoying Lénita’s spontaneous, rough around the edges humour.

‘Well, uh, I’ve got to go, but I’ll see you soon, I guess... With my grandma, I mean...’

‘Yeah, no worries. See ya later!’

She walked home feeling energized, and slightly happier than before. She knew, in that moment, exactly what she wanted to share with her community. She’d finally put her finger on what was bothering her. As stupid as it might seem, she realised that by making her appearance the focal point of her life, she had forgotten—or perhaps she’d never known—that it was possible to have other priorities. She was only pretty on the outside. She had neglected others and neglected herself in the process. But she would change. She took a moment to write down what was burning in her heart. She hesitated only for a second before posting it. Her message now belonged to those who would read it.

“This message is to all those (including me) who don’t really know what more we can hope to gain from this frantic race for validation. To those who get a kick out of spewing hatred on social networks. Perhaps especially to them.

You say I’m hypocritical, and you’re right. And you probably are too, along with our whole society. A society that scrutinises every woman, that bases their worth on physical beauty, that puts down women who are considered ugly, or fat, or simply average, but then blames these same women, who can’t deal with the daily humiliation any longer, for resorting to solutions such as cosmetic surgery. What message are we sending? Be born beautiful or keep your mouth shut? If they tell you you’re not enough, don’t try to meet the standards imposed on you. Endure the ridicule. That’s all you deserve. Be beautiful, but natural, otherwise you’re a fake. Less valuable. But if you are valuable, regarded as beautiful by other people, you are one of the women who are given the right to exist. Under contract. For your youth. Your freshness. Without too much freedom. Don’t be over the top, or you’ll freak people out. Your beauty doesn’t belong to you. As for the rest of you, accept yourselves anyway, quietly, humbly, in the name of Mother Nature. In the name of courage. Oh yes, women should also be courageous. Existing as a woman means existing with struggles we did not choose.

In writing this to you, I have finally answered the crucial question: Why has physical beauty become such an important aspect of my life? And I owe you this answer.

It's simple: for legitimacy. The more I conformed to our idea of what a woman "should be", the more I dared to reveal myself, to express myself. I thought my existence was conditional. Basically, I've just stupidly realised that I had the right to live even if I was unattractive...

If surgery made me feel more confident, that's my business, and I have nothing to apologise for. But it certainly didn't fix everything because I haven't fixed the most important thing: loving myself.

On the other hand, I shouldn't have lied. In my own little way, I reinforced the impossible rules that govern our bodies by deliberately showing myself in the best light, by airbrushing photos, erasing the flaws, and then pretending they didn't exist. I apologise for promoting so many products that reinforce unrealistic ideals. I was conditioned as much as I have conditioned other people. Many of the brands I've partnered with don't have your best interests at heart, and they exploit your insecurities. I'm sorry for not being vigilant, for putting profit before your wellbeing. Both physical and psychological. And I'm drawing a line under this phase of my life.

I'm sorry for only seeing you as numbers that helped me tackle my own narcissistic flaws and sometimes, above all, for setting aside my morals to make money.

I'm going off social media to take some time to answer this question: Who am I when I stop asking myself whether I'm "enough" and decide that I am enough, just as I am?

And if, like me, you feel bad about looking in on lives that are not your own, try living yours first. You are beautiful in so many ways that are yours to discover.

From the bottom of my heart, I hope you find them.

Jeanne."

Jeanne didn't know it yet, but her post would be shared thousands of times, commented on, talked about for days. Her followers would double, and hundreds of new "ethical" brands would be keen to work with her. The system was feeding off itself, and whatever she did, she was part of it. To disconnect from it completely was to disappear.

Jeanne uninstalled all the apps from her phone so she could have a rest. She had taken a giant leap today. But so much was still unresolved. What did she want to do now? What needs, what passions, what desires were inside her?

Her phone was buzzing constantly. Her agency, her friends, some of her business partners were desperately trying to get hold of her. Her mother called her for the sixth time that day, but she didn't pick up. She needed to cut off contact with her family for a few hours. With the whole world in fact. She spent a long time thinking about Lénita. Who would she have been if she was in her shoes? She, who knew that whatever happened, a helping hand would reach out to her. What were Lénita's hopes and dreams? She tried to meditate but instead fell asleep, for once, remarkably, without biting her nails.

Two hours later a call from an unknown number woke her. She answered, intrigued. A spam call? If only. She hurriedly put her shoes on, ordered an Uber and ran downstairs to wait for it, her heart in her throat, aware that after that call, everything had changed.