

It was a December 31st just like any other. The annual landmark: a chic dinner at Paul's. It would, as usual, be faultless: tasteful, witty and elegant. Definitely no party favours or streamers. As always, there would be a surprise guest. Apart from me, Paul always invited people who didn't know each other and whom he himself barely knew, who would spend a single evening together and almost certainly never meet again. It amused and intrigued him. It appealed to his usually repressed bohemian side, which I teased him about relentlessly. The point was that for those few hours nothing was at stake: everyone came as they were, without any fixed ideas or the kinds of social pressure that are a usual part of suburban bourgeois life. We made each other's acquaintance without judgment or expectation, since everything suggested that we were unlikely ever to see each other again; at most we might bump into each other shopping in town one Saturday.

Tonight's special guest, which made me very happy, was my older sister, Anna, and her husband Ludovic. I'd introduced them to Paul shortly after we first met and since then the three had become fast friends. In a momentous first for them, contrary to tradition they had not gone to spend New Year's Eve in the sun, and were instead honouring us with their presence. The upshot of this was devastating for my hyperactive sister, who was always on the brink of domestic burnout, though that didn't stop her insisting on being even more active.

Ludovic's idea of a holiday was "doing nothing"; he had no desire to run around getting involved in all the activities that were part of the Club Med experience. One day the previous autumn he had slammed his hand down on the table and announced he'd had enough: of course he still loved her as much as the day they met, but he couldn't stand watching her beating the air any more, she was wearing him out. At the age of fifty, and after twenty-five years of marriage, he wanted a bit of peace and quiet. To my astonishment, my sister bit her tongue and didn't try to persuade him otherwise.

But Anna was totally thrown and needed something to compensate. The Christmas holidays this year had been the scene of several bleakly comic situations: she decided to take over the organization of what until then had always been our mother's preserve, namely the big family lunch on Christmas Day itself. It didn't take long for them to start fighting like cats and dogs, while I took great care to stay as far away as possible. In the end of course she concocted festivities worthy of an American Christmas movie. Taking care of every last detail – and to hell with the cost – was Anna's credo. Since then, she hadn't known what to do with herself. Once they'd opened their presents and eaten the last crumbs of the yule log, their three children, now young adults, had disappeared, keen to get their mother off their backs. It would come as no surprise if she was taking over Paul's kitchen tonight, since he would never say no if it meant he didn't need to hire someone to cook. Paul loved having guests without having to worry about the practical details.

I ought to have been excited and full of energy, but strangely, it was the opposite. I would have rather liked to curl up on the sofa in my pyjamas and spend the evening at home cosseting myself. Lately I hadn't been able to stop thinking about time passing, about all the things I'd done in my life and all the things I'd failed to do. It was like a mid-term review of the year I turned forty. This must explain that ... And, for the first time, I hadn't stuck to my usual dress

code. At previous New Year's Eve parties I'd always made an effort to be the most striking, wearing vibrant, vaguely bohemian dresses, or vamping it up with 1950s glamour, for the sheer fun of it. As I cast one last glance in the mirror before I left, a word came to mind: *dark*. I was dressed in black from head to toe, a flame-haired Morticia in leather trousers.

I managed to find a place to park near the Joan of Arc tower. At least later I wouldn't have to walk across the whole of Rouen to get back to my car. Paul lived in a beautifully renovated, spacious flat on the top floor of an old building on Rue Jeanne d'Arc. He had never taken the step of moving to a house. He cultivated his Parisian side; living in an apartment two blocks from the station reassured him. It was nothing more than a silly principle, since no-one who knew him was under any illusion that he was ever going back to live in Paris. His apartment was both luxurious and understated. Paul had an exquisite taste for beautiful objects, works of art and designer furniture, but he knew not to overdo it. He wasn't a collector. Except when it came to women, cars and fine wine.

The champagne – superb – flowed freely, and the food was sophisticated and delicious. Paul's conquest for the evening was charming, if a little giggly, but I excused her and anyway, nobody was going to see her again. Paul would spend a few nights with her, take her out for so many dinners, and then a few weeks, or at most months, later, she would disappear to make way for someone else. Paul grew bored very quickly. For the almost eighteen years that I'd known him, I'd seen him move from one woman to another without pause. But that he was still doing it at the age of forty-nine was becoming exasperating. I kept warning him that he was going to turn into a handsome old roué, which invariably elicited the same reaction: an enormous guffaw.

My neighbour at dinner cast the only shadow of the evening. When I realized which of the twenty guests he was, I immediately shot my sister a look, since I knew it must have been she who was responsible for this masterstroke. Anna's look of faux innocence confirmed my intuition. I had to restrain myself from leaping at her throat. She had clearly had no scruples about using her trump card – the opportunity for one of Paul's close retinue to bring a surprise guest. Where I had always resisted doing so, she had apparently decided to indulge herself at my expense. She was so concerned about the fact that I was single that she was always on the lookout for suitable "candidates", as she put it. This one was a colleague of Ludovic whom I knew rather too well. We used to see each other regularly at dinner at their house and I'd always found him pleasant enough, certainly not lacking in charm. I'd yielded to his advances a couple of years previously. What a disaster that turned out to be! He may have been the ideal friend, but as a lover he was truly hopeless, in a class of his own, beating any rival hollow. My sister had no idea why I'd abruptly ended the affair. It was obvious from his idiotic expression that she must have hinted to him that he was still in with a chance. I kept catching Paul's baffled gaze. He must have noticed my discomfort. I managed to convey to him what was going on with a discreet nod towards my neighbour and he almost choked on a scallop. True to his role as the perfect host, he recovered immediately, while discreetly keeping a watchful eye on me.

As I'd predicted, Anna had indeed taken over Paul's kitchen. While we were finishing the first course she caught my eye, gesturing for me to join her in the kitchen. I jumped at the chance to take a break from the idiot's schmoozing; he clearly hadn't cottoned on to a thing.

"So, Reine", she murmured in dulcet tones.

She took my arm, inclined her head and looked at me with a dreamy expression.

“What?” I snapped.

I shook her hand off and poured myself a glass of red wine. To hell with not mixing my drinks, I needed a pick me up.

“What do you think of my little surprise?”

I gave her a filthy look, simultaneously raising a defensive hand.

“You’re very pleased with yourself, aren’t you?”

She clapped her hands, convinced that I was delighted with her scheming.

“Did you see how his jaw dropped when he saw you rock up dressed like that? I didn’t know you had leather trousers. You look gorgeous. When you’re dressed all in black all you can see is your green eyes.”

I opened my eyes wide like marbles.

“You really are a pain in the neck. Stop it right now! Don’t start getting ideas. Nothing is going to happen.”

Her expression changed from happy excitement to complete bewilderment.

“Why? Aren’t you pleased to see him?”

“What do you think? May I remind you that I know him rather too well already? Thank you very much.”

Looking peeved, she began plating the main course.

“Ludovic warned me you’d react like this.”

I burst out laughing.

“I love my brother-in-law! Can we not talk about something else?”

Like a little girl sulking because she hadn’t got what she wanted, she shrugged her shoulders and took a deep sigh.

“Anyway, what can I do to help?”

“Nothing,” she muttered.

“So you asked me to come into the kitchen just to find out if your matchmaking had been a success?”

She abandoned her look of an outraged diva and threw me an amused look that made me burst out laughing again. She was extraordinary.

“You’re unbelievable!”

I went back and sat down, touched by my sister’s kindness, the way she always did everything to make everyone in her little world happy. Her cheerfulness was so contagious that even my neighbour was granted a radiant smile.

11.54. The atmosphere was quietly warming up under the combined effect of champagne and light conversation. The fact that we didn’t know each other didn’t stop us celebrating the end of the year together and having an excellent time. It was a feat that Paul always managed to pull off. I even managed to forget about my disappointing neighbour at dinner. Yet despite the general good mood, I kept compulsively checking my phone, wondering if, despite our promises to each other, I was going to hear from *him*. I’d sworn I would resist, and I didn’t want to disturb him. I jumped at the pop of a champagne cork. Strangely, I felt somehow very distant from all the euphoria. I was watching everyone like a smiling spectator, but I was terribly melancholy. Which wasn’t me at all.

10. 9. 8. 7. 6. 5. 4. 3. 2. 1 ... Everyone got up from the table. Couples kissed. And my neighbour, who was evidently not a quick learner, tried to get closer to me. I managed to stifle an exasperated sigh and gave him a pathetic, pained smile.

“Happy new year, Reine.”

He leaned towards me and gave me a peck on the cheek, clumsily trying to put his arms around my waist. I felt my cell phone vibrating in my hand and swiftly wriggled free.

“Excuse me, I have to get this.”

I didn't give him time to say a word as I moved away to answer. It was him. He had been thinking of me after all, he hadn't forgotten me. We'd agreed that it would be pointless to try and speak that night. I knew he had better things to do than call me. But perhaps he did still need me, and deep down I rejoiced.

"Happy new year, my darling."

I couldn't hear his response, there was too much noise around me and, on the other end of the line, excited shrieking. Braving the winter cold, I went out on to the balcony.

"Can you hear me?" I asked, blocking my ear.

"Mum?"

"Yes, Noah, I'm here."

"Happy new year, mum."

I blinked to stop a tear from running down my cheek.

"Thank you ... Are you having a good evening?"

"Yeah! It's brilliant!"

Behind him I could hear the sound of his friends singing, shouting and joshing each other.

"Go back to your friends. We'll talk tomorrow. You're being sensible?"

"Promise!"

I imagined his irresistible, charming smile as he rolled his eyes up to heaven to show how fed up he was with his mother.

"Love you, mum."

"I love you too, my..."

He'd already hung up. I rubbed my arms to try to warm myself and took a packet of cigarettes out of my jacket pocket. I lit one and smoked it slowly. To have heard his voice even for two minutes filled me with happiness; now I was going to enjoy the rest of the evening.

"Happy new year," Paul whispered in my ear.

He put an arm around my shoulders and kissed my hair.

“And to you too,” I said.

A few minutes passed without either of us moving, both lost in contemplation of the city at our feet, as the lights and the sound of beeping horns, firecrackers and partygoers floated up to us.

“You’re somewhere else tonight,” he said. “What are you thinking about?”

“Everything and nothing, all at once.”

I could not express it any better. Recently, some of my decisions and their consequences had been coming to the surface – always that damn passing of time – and making me anxious. There were times it was so bad I had trouble breathing. Paul knew it. He felt it. But now was neither the place nor the time to talk about it. Anna had come out to join us and they exchanged a knowing glance. In the guise of a new year’s embrace, she kissed my cheek, and I did the same.

“Can I have one?” she said, nudging me with her elbow.

“Your annual smoke?” I retorted, mischievous.

“Oh, don’t be a bore.”

We both laughed and she helped herself. The roles were reversed; as a teenager, I’d always helped myself to hers; nowadays she pinched them from her little sister. Unlike me, she had actually listened to our father when he told us to give up like he had. I was the impervious one of the family, in spite of him always telling me to “think of your son, my little girl.”

“Did you speak to Noah?” Paul asked.

My huge smile was all the answer they needed.

“How is he?” asked Anna, always the good protective aunt.

Like me, Paul managed to stifle a laugh.

“Noah is seventeen and partying with his friends. How do you think he is?”

“Oh, stop it, I can’t help it, I always get nervous when they go out on the town.”

And what about me, you think I don’t worry too?

“That’s why we love you so!” I assured her.

“Are you planning on spending the rest of the evening out here ignoring everybody else?” broke in Ludovic, who had just appeared. I pulled away from Paul’s and my sister’s embrace and went over to my brother-in-law, with whom I exchanged a new year’s hug.

“Reine, are you aware of the fact that your sister’s only new year’s resolution is to find you a man?”

Behind us she chuckled. Paul was not about to be left out.

“We aren’t out of the woods you know. It’s not like Anna’s actually managing to pull it off.”

“I did warn her, but you know what she’s like when she gets a bee in her bonnet.”

It was my turn to laugh. “She’s already made me sign up to the gym, surely that’s enough!” I said.

“That is quite an achievement,” said Paul.

“And when are you going to stop holding your stupid dinner parties?” I teased him in turn.

Giggling, we returned to the living room and the evening resumed.

It was after three in the morning by the time I got home to my little house in the hills of Rouen. When Noah had started secondary school, as a way of coming to terms with my age I’d embarked on the great adventure of buying real estate. I fell in love with these four walls where Noah and I had made our nest. It was like us: a bit of a mess, a little unusual, not very big – but we were very happy there. It was home.

I was exhausted, my feet were aching and I felt the beginning of a migraine that only sleep would knock on the head. But before I collapsed into bed, I couldn't resist poking my head round the door to peek into the chaos of Noah's room. I had acted proud in front of my sister earlier on, but deep down, I was as bad as she was. I hated it when he went out. I didn't like him being far away, even though he was seventeen, and despite the fact that he was almost two heads taller than me. The house felt empty without him, without all the noise he made, doors slamming, the sound of him playing his guitar. It was happening more and more. It was perfectly normal. Entirely logical. Noah was growing up; in a few months he'd be taking the baccalaureate and getting his driving license. I remembered being his age. I'd had only one idea in mind: leaving home, getting away from my parents – though I loved them very much – being with my friends, tasting freedom. That was the stage Noah was at and I was trying to let him go, that was my role, in spite of the empty hole it left in the house. That's how it is being a parent. I'd always refused to be one of those over-protective, intrusive mothers, even if the fact of having brought up my son alone would have offered an excuse. But Noah would never have stood it and it would have been my fault if I'd stifled him. Instead, I chose to let him have his freedom and confidence, and most importantly I knew how lucky I was. We were very close, in spite of the inexorable passing of time.

The next morning I woke up far too early. It was systematic; I was incapable of sleeping in and my senses were on the alert whenever he was out of the house. I rolled my eyes at my own absurdity as I swallowed a paracetamol and made myself a coffee. I nibbled a bit of breakfast and then made the traditional phone call to wish my parents a happy new year. While I was telling about them the previous evening, I got a text message from Noah asking me to pick him up.

As I drew up in front of the house where he had spent the night, a flock of four not very bright-eyed teenagers emerged from the front door. They looked like they'd barely slept a wink and they still smelled of beer – not to mention all the other things that I didn't want to know about – and sweat. Noah's friends chorused "happy new year" and offered me a series of rather pungent kisses. They liked me; they weren't disturbed by my presence on their territory, seeing me as a mother who was cooler than theirs just because I was ten years younger.

"Mum, would you mind giving the guys a lift home?"

"Sure. But before we go, will you promise me you've left Bastien's place completely tidy?"

I didn't want to imagine what a state the place was in. I would never have let them throw a party at my house. They exchanged knowing glances indicating that they'd done all they could to repair the damage and that that was all that could be expected of them. Nice one, guys! I rolled my eyes, amused.

It took nearly an hour of driving to all four corners of the city to drop them all back before we finally got home.

"Are you hungry?" I asked Noah, who was looking a little green.

"Not really."

I stifled an urge to laugh and cut short his agony.

"Why don't you go up and take a shower, brush your teeth and take a nap. I think that's all you're capable of at this point."

He didn't even try to pretend otherwise.

"Sorry."

I ruffled his gungy hair.

"For today, I'm going to leave you alone, but do your best to perk up when you come back down again."

He kissed me on the cheek and turned to go upstairs.

"Mum? Can we do the theatre tonight?"

My smile reassured him. Before he fell asleep, I heard him on the phone to his grandparents and Paul, with whom, as always, the conversation went on and on.

By the time he came downstairs from his lair in the early evening to join me on the sofa, everything was set up for our ritual. When he was little I had made a huge panel, called *The Theatre of Noah and Mummy*, which grew at the same rate as my son. It had pride of place above the mantelpiece. Every December 31st, or, since he had started going out on New Year's Eve, on New Year's Day itself, we would eat crepes and make a selection of photos, souvenirs, tickets from concerts, train trips, plane journeys and races, even a comment from a teacher – everything, big or small, that had happened over the previous twelve months, which we would use to make a collage. This year, we'd chosen a ticket for a concert by Collectif Fauve, which I had taken Noah and four of his friends to Paris to see: I'd volunteered to do it, with unmitigated pleasure. I'd hung back a little, watching as they threw themselves into the mosh pit. It had been perfect. Then there were pictures of our holiday in Crete the previous summer, a one-week road trip followed by a week at Club Med, where he'd learned to windsail. For eight days we'd barely seen each other. We also cut out his teacher's comment from his first philosophy essay, which was so magnificently off-topic that he'd earned an U, a massive earful from me, and a pat on the back from his teacher for his original and thoughtful reflections.

Every year I became more and more aware of how incredibly lucky I was to have my son in my life. These moments were so precious; they allowed me to forget my everyday worries and put aside for a moment my errors and uncertainties.

Once we'd stuck down all the things we'd selected, Noah, proud as a peacock, hung it on the wall. Since he'd been old enough to carry it on his own without my help, this had been his job and he took it very seriously.

“Come and see, mum.”

“Coming.”

Of course we were proud of our artistry, but what moved me the most was watching Noah, who couldn't take his eyes off it. This time, I had even more of a lump in my throat than usual. I felt I'd been tipped backwards into the past. The older my son grew, the more he was becoming a man, and his growing resemblance to his father was undeniable. My reaction didn't escape him.

“Mum, are you okay?”

We never talked about him. For the last two years or so, Noah had refused to broach the subject, without ever saying why, convinced that the problem was resolved. I had accepted this, not wanting to add salt to the wound.

“You've got a funny look on your face,” he said.

“Well, I've not had a nap!”

He chuckled, teasing.

“Getting too old to party?”

“A little respect, young man!” I retorted, laughing. “I'm off to bed.”

“I'm going to stay up and watch some television.”

I went over and hugged him, holding him close. He let me, so I made the most of it.

“I love you, Noah, to the moon and back. Don't you ever forget that.”

“Me too, I love you, mum.”

“Good night.”

I let him go with a big smile and headed for my room. I couldn't stop myself giving him one last look. He lay slumped on the sofa, remote in hand. I grinned at the sight of him.