

THE INTERNATIONAL BESTSELLER

THE GOOD GIRL'S
GUIDE TO BEING

Nicer, Calmer,

More Patient,

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The Art of Saying What You Want
and Getting the Life You Deserve

Alexandra Reinwarth

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Introduction

It all began when I said “Fuck you!” to Catherine. I should mention that I normally don’t say things like that to people. Generally, I’m not that generous with invitations to have sex, not under any circumstances.

But Catherine, it so happens, is one of those people who forever gives you the feeling that you have just made a big mistake and that you now owe them. Do you know people like that? People who are always complaining but never change anything? People who suck out your life energy like young children suck Hi-C out of its carton with a straw?

Catherine loves dwelling in a valley of tears. If you took her at face value you would think she was depressed. But during our relationship I came to realize that she is not at all depressed—she is just a pain in the ass.

Life seemed to permanently deal a bad hand to Catherine: her job was lousy, her relationship with her boyfriend was on the brink, her family habitually blamed her for everything, her future was bleak, and she was at a complete loss in terms of what to do. But while I was busy worrying about her, Catherine went on a cruise, had lots of parties, and married her boyfriend.

One time, I felt so sorry for her (“*My marriage is practically over*”) that I suggested that she go on a short vacation to Venice with her husband. It was totally my idea for the two of them to do something nice together. I looked after their dog, watered their plants, and topped up their seawater pool with salt. Catherine’s house is not exactly around the corner from mine. Also, her house is very big, modern, and extremely expensively furnished—despite the huge financial commitments she is burdened with.

Catherine, so she claims, is far too good for this world. She once had building work done and paid the workmen on time. Then she boasted how virtuous she was because she didn't make them wait for the money for three months or cheat them out of half the sum.

"I thought of the man's family," she said with tears in her eyes, looking like a saint.

When we met up after the Venice trip she was in a bit of a hurry—she urgently had to take her husband to his massage, because the beds, in the hotel I had recommended, were a *ca-tas-tro-phe*. The whole trip had been a disaster, but she had coped as usual and put on a brave face.

When we next met up, her mother was ill, which she told me about in a voice that one could only assume meant her mom would kick the bucket the very next day. In short, there is always something going wrong for Catherine. Everything is a heavy burden—nothing less. As it happened, Mom just had a headache or an ingrown toenail or whatever.

Do you get the gist? It was always the same—Catherine was all about Catherine. At some point, I realized I didn't like orbiting Catherine's world like a satellite anymore—because I am a person, too.

I have no idea why I didn't send Catherine packing a long time ago, even though my partner, L., had suggested that I do so time and again. At first, I wasn't aware of the fact that she was using me, and I also simply tried to avoid confrontations. But during an overhaul of my life while I undertook my Happiness Project, I came to the conclusion: I need to get rid of Catherine. I need to become a bit of a dick.

Until then, I had never finished a friendship with a female friend. Ever. The normal course of things is that the two of you don't get along so well anymore, you meet up less and less often, and then the whole thing quietly disappears. Done, no one is harmed, these things happen. But the kind of friends who suck you dry like a leech, you simply can't get rid of easily. I wasn't quite sure how I could manage this "letting go" of a friend. How could I behave firmly, without wriggling like a worm on a hook? I found the mere idea of it so *awkward*.

L. made a very pragmatic suggestion: "You just go to her and say: 'Catherine, you're driving me nuts and I don't want to see you anymore.'" Then he stopped, thought about it and added: "You stupid narcissist." L. never liked Catherine.

I know there are people who would do exactly that. But not me. On the contrary, I play for the team that forever apologizes when someone pushes them.

To avoid the whole thing, I thought of different strategies:

- I would send L. to say it.
- I would take on a new identity and pretend to Catherine that, sadly, I had died.
- Sadly, actually die.

When the big moment came, and Catherine and I were sitting face-to-face in a café, she luckily behaved so impossibly that I could utilize the huge surge of anger inside me and surf on it toward the very moment I said:

“Catherine?”

“Yes?”

“Fuck you!”

For lots of people, this would not have been a big thing, but I felt like a six-foot-six Joan of Arc. Leaving the café, I felt like I was walking in slow motion, and like boxers on their way to the ring, my exit was accompanied by a rousing tune, trumpets and all. I threw my scarf with such verve around my shoulders that I set a stack of innocent menu sheets from the nearby counter flying. As they gently sailed toward the floor, I left the place with my head held high. I wouldn't have been amazed if a faithful horse had been waiting for me outside to take me to more dangerous adventures.

“Hey! Joan of Arc wasn't a boxer...” L. interrupts my story later that evening and looks at me quite confused. Men sometimes don't listen properly, do they? I imagine that they hear some quiet background rustling, take in two or three significant phrases, and make up the rest in their heads. If those words don't make sense together, they have a problem.

Of course, I'm not particularly interested in French national heroines or even boxing; it is not even about Catherine and her stupid saltwater pool. It is about the fact that these two little words—“fuck you!”—can put you in such a sky-high mood.

“I think it is about freedom,” said Anne, my esoteric friend, when I told her about my moment of pride, and I think she is right. It was a liberating

act, but the whole imagery of music and trumpets and a horse wasn't caused by the fact that I had liberated myself from Catherine, the pain in the ass but because in a single moment I had liberated myself from my own petty, self-imposed, restricting rules. To simply do what seemed right for me—without a single consideration about whether the other person still liked me afterward. Wonderful! Shouldn't we always behave like that? Be open and direct? But where exactly is the line between being honest and being a complete dick?

In the following weeks, I noticed many other situations where my behavior was triggered by what other people would think of me and not by what I wanted to actually achieve myself. (I didn't just notice that my life without Catherine was much better. Which it was.) Why did I put makeup on in the morning when all I was doing was taking our son to playgroup? Hell, no! *Why did I do that?* The depressing answer is that I wanted to make a good impression on the other parents. But I don't really like 90 percent of them. On the subject of "liking": why did I go to the office Christmas party? Because I like my boss and my colleagues? Nope! And why am I still in this stupid WhatsApp group that's responsible for my mobile vibrating all through the night like other people's sex toys? The more I thought about it, the more I realized: I spent far too much time with people I didn't like, in places I didn't want to be, doing things I didn't want to do.

How terrible is that?

The more issues I could think of, the more detailed my plan for freedom became. If merely banishing Catherine from my life had been such an amazing success, what kind of wonderful life was ahead of me when I canceled all the other things that didn't agree with me at all?

If, for example, I said to my colleagues in the office: "Thank you, but I don't want to come for a drink after work. No, not just today, but generally," that would be so much better than my usual strategy of inventing absurd excuses and then tripping myself up trying to remember the lies. For example:

"Is your sister better?"

"Sorry? I don't have a sister!"

That has really happened.

“Do you see what I mean?” I asked L. the same evening, when he was chopping up vegetables.

“Hmm, well, yes,” he mumbled. “It’s only... I hope it’s not a plan to turn into a selfish jerk...”

“Oh no!” I protested, but, of course, he was right. There was quite a considerable chance that during this liberating campaign of mine I would turn into a dick, but I felt like I would be able to deal with that. I was full of energy—my life would be wonderful! If I only invested my time, my energy (and my money) in things, people, and situations that would make me happy—well, that would be amazing, wouldn’t it?

“Wouldn’t it?” I asked my little boy, who was enthusiastically clinging to my legs.

“Chocolate,” he said, as usual, because it is his favorite word.

Exactly. Chocolate.

If you believe your life could do with a bit more freedom, leisure, self-determination, and chocolate, and fewer Catherines, WhatsApp groups, and Christmas parties—you are in the right place. We will investigate the following:

- How not to give a damn about other people or issues.
- How not to mutate into a dick at the same time.
- What criteria are helpful to distinguish between what is really important and what is not.
- How small decisions can have a huge impact on the quality of your life.

We will also try quite a funny little exercise about how not to give a damn anymore. And I will point out a few hurdles I stumbled over in the course of sorting all this out.

Before we start, here is the promised funny exercise. It is a visualization, by which I mean an image that we create in our head and can recall at any point. I hope you like it as much as I do.

Right, let’s try it. You know bullfighters, don’t you? The ones who say “*Olé!*”, those toreros with firm buttocks and silly clothes? Imagine you are

a bullfighter. And now imagine you had one of those red capes they use to attract the bulls. Got it? Good.

No matter what we are going to encounter in this book and in life—everything that you are determined not to give a damn about anymore—just visualize letting it gallop toward you, getting faster and faster, and then, just before it reaches you, imagine yourself taking an elegant side step like a bullfighter and letting it run past you at full speed. *Olé!*

There is another Ole who will help you through the following pages. When I was still pondering how amazing it would be to only do what is important to me, I remembered someone who has always done exactly that (as well as my son, who is very good at it): my friend Ole.

Ole is a childhood friend and a very successful business-man. He appears to be seven feet tall, he's a great guy, *and* he never does anything that he doesn't want to do. Needless to say, Ole isn't in any WhatsApp groups and only attends the office Christmas party if he knows he will enjoy himself. Despite this, he is popular as a boss, and he has many friends and a wonderful family.

He is not the guy, though, who would help you move house, and he would not enthusiastically clap when you recite your favorite poetry, even if you asked him really nicely. But that's all right; that's just the way he is. And everybody likes him.

When someone at work asks me to quickly go over a document, I tend to say, "Sure, pass it over." That is the exact reason I always run out of time with my own work, get stressed, and end up angry with myself.

When someone asks Ole whether he could quickly check this or that, he says: "Nope." And he won't do it. Consequently, he has more time, he is less stressed, he doesn't get mad at himself, and still everybody likes him, because he is a great guy.

On my journey to not giving a shit anymore, Ole has helped me a lot: I simply imagine how he would react in a tricky situation. It is like Ole is standing right next to me—all seven feet of him—saying: "You will not do this under any circumstances, my dear."

Do you know someone like him? If so, imagine him or her standing right next to you. But if you don't know anyone like Ole, I will lend you mine.

So, let's start.

Why it is so difficult not to care

Let's explore why it is so difficult to say to our friend Tom in a nice and normal manner: "Dear Tom, I wish you all the best for your poetry slam tonight in Bumfuck Nowhere, but I won't be coming. I urgently have to... lie on the sofa at home with my husband and the dog."

For some people, the mere idea of saying something like that can be so *awkward* that instead of cuddling on the sofa with their chosen one, they would rather sit on a wobbly chair in the town hall of Bumfuck Nowhere, sipping a warm white wine and listening to poems like:

*Bell, bell, what's this hell
Taste, taste, what's the haste
Bear, bear, what's to bear
Honk, honk, he comes near
Tackle, tackle, we will flee
Flee flee, to the sea...!*

This is not an exaggeration.

And then you drive home, bark at your partner and the dog because they had such a cozy evening, and go to bed sulking. Sometimes you find yourself already attempting to come up with an excuse for next Wednesday, because Tom has another gig in Bumfuck Nowhere Else.

That cannot be right.

You don't have to listen to Tom's poems just because you like him. You don't suddenly have to *not* give a damn about Tom himself. But you are allowed to skip the poetry events from now on.^{[1](#)}

It isn't really surprising how easily embarrassed we all are. From day one we are trained to be nice, not to embarrass others, and to be considerate. Don't get me wrong, that's a good thing. I think it is great when people are trained from day one not to behave like assholes—even though, God knows, it doesn't always work. At the same time, I would appreciate it if we also had the option of finding things, people, or situations downright stupid. Here is a very recent example from the nursery school down the road.

There is an old German nursery rhyme about a dancing cat: a cat is

dancing on her own, and then various animals come and ask her to dance with them. But the cat finds fault with every single one: the rabbit is too wobbly, the dog barks too loudly, the hedgehog is too prickly, etc., until in the end the tomcat turns up and he “strokes her fur and kisses her gently, and all of a sudden, she dances with him.”

It is a wonderful song, promise. In my opinion, anyway. But it seems it is not politically correct anymore. So that none of the children who are acting out the dance-loving animals get rejected, the whole song is now reworded in such a way that every animal gets a chance to dance with the cat. Each animal whispers something in the cat’s ear, and each time she complies. Why, oh why? Why can’t the cat find the hedgehog far too prickly to dance with? He *is* prickly.

In my opinion, one should not have to dance with partners who are wobbly, loud, awkward, or prickly at all. Nope.

And even when the cat finds her tom, the story doesn’t end there anymore. Instead the tomcat brings all the others into the circle, and they all dance together, with a jump here and a jump there, until the sun goes down, and they all go home.

Everybody must do everything together. It’s like being in a group of tourists, all marching behind someone ahead holding a flag. There is no escape. Once you are grown up, you will bear the consequences of this brainwashing shit and you will find yourself sitting on a wobbly chair in the town hall of Bumfuck Nowhere.

Taking it even further, children are also encouraged to give up their toys to other random children, a tendency spreading now through playgrounds all over the country. It’s madness: Leon has a car, but then Ben wants it too. Could be tricky. And immediately Leon’s mother comes running and delivers her lecture to her little boy: “Now then, give little Ben your car, you have played with it for quite a long time, and Ben would be *sooo* happy...” She goes on and on until a grumpy Leon, close to tears, hands over the car. But it is *his* fucking car! Tough for little Ben. During the next stage of his life, it will take quite a few Kevins and Damians from the nearby problem neighborhood to undo this.

Children have the ability to not give a crap about unimportant things from the day they are born. Just like dogs. They follow the principle: “If you cannot play with it or eat it, just piss on it and let it be.”

But children also act by the pleasure principle. They do not make conscious decisions. The pleasure principle works like this:

Chocolate = good = eat as much as possible

Only later, after quite a few tummy aches, will this principle be questioned.

During puberty, it gets difficult. Other people's opinions are now immensely important. This isn't just about hairstyles or taste in music or clothes; it concerns the whole person. During this phase, when people are extremely insecure and confused, they look for role models and try to emulate the image that seems to be the most popular.

Girls find this even more difficult than boys, because the confusing role of being a "woman" is added to the mix. It's suddenly important what the media in general have to say about everything. My son, not even three years old, expressed this quite succinctly after he had watched some advertising on television. "Woman naked, man talks." For this reason, for girls, everything revolves around their own appearance—and some people never lose this focus.

Let's start with this topic.

You as a Person

- Bikini body
- General looks
- Self-improvement

It makes sense to start with oneself. Everybody has a vague sense of wanting to improve something. My butt should be smaller, my bank balance bigger, my self-esteem more stable, my sex life somehow more exciting, and yes, it might be a good idea to do more exercise. Let's start... let's start with chocolate.

In normal life, people somehow keep a certain weight without much starving or eating like a horse (Christmastime is an exception). This “normal” weight has nothing, absolutely nothing to do with the shape one is supposed to have for a so-called bikini body.

The “bikini body”

A bikini body is what the general public thinks of as a shape fit for a bikini. Last time I had that I was twelve. Ever since then, bikinis and my body have lived on different planets that could never be reunited. At times, there were not even diplomatic relations between them. From the tender age of thirteen—and I can tell you that's quite a few years ago—until very recently, I pulled in my tummy every single summer. Between June and September, on the beach, by the sea, and in the swimming pool, I only

dared to take very shallow breaths and, in the eighties, when baring your midriff was fashionable, I hardly ever took a breath. It is amazing that I didn't suffer any long-term damage...

Thanks to popular women's magazines, I also knew how to best camouflage my surplus fat. Lying down on a towel or blanket, there was only one possible position: on my back, legs slightly raised—because then they look slimmer. Only those skinny, lanky types of girls confidently sat upright in the lotus position or whatever way they liked sitting... but they always kept their T-shirts on to distract from their nonexistent breasts. See, there is always something.

My behavior nowadays is more relaxed. But not totally. I still catch myself sitting on the edge of a chair, because that makes my thighs look slimmer. I must have trained myself to do this at some stage. Behavior like this happens automatically, like when people with bad teeth automatically smile with their mouth closed. I know that in this life the perfect “beach body” is not achievable for me. But I still feel an urge to work toward it. Like a solemn reminder, I own a pair of jeans one size smaller than I normally take, and if they could, the jeans would raise an eyebrow every time I stand in front of the closet in my underpants.

The most absurd aspect of this story is that in real life I find women particularly attractive when they appear to be confident and self-assured with their big nose, their frizzy hair, their wide hips, and their ample tummy.

Maybe this “woman naked/man talking” thing that my son spotted is the real culprit, but I think it is about time to ask yourself:

Do I have a bikini body or at least something approaching one?

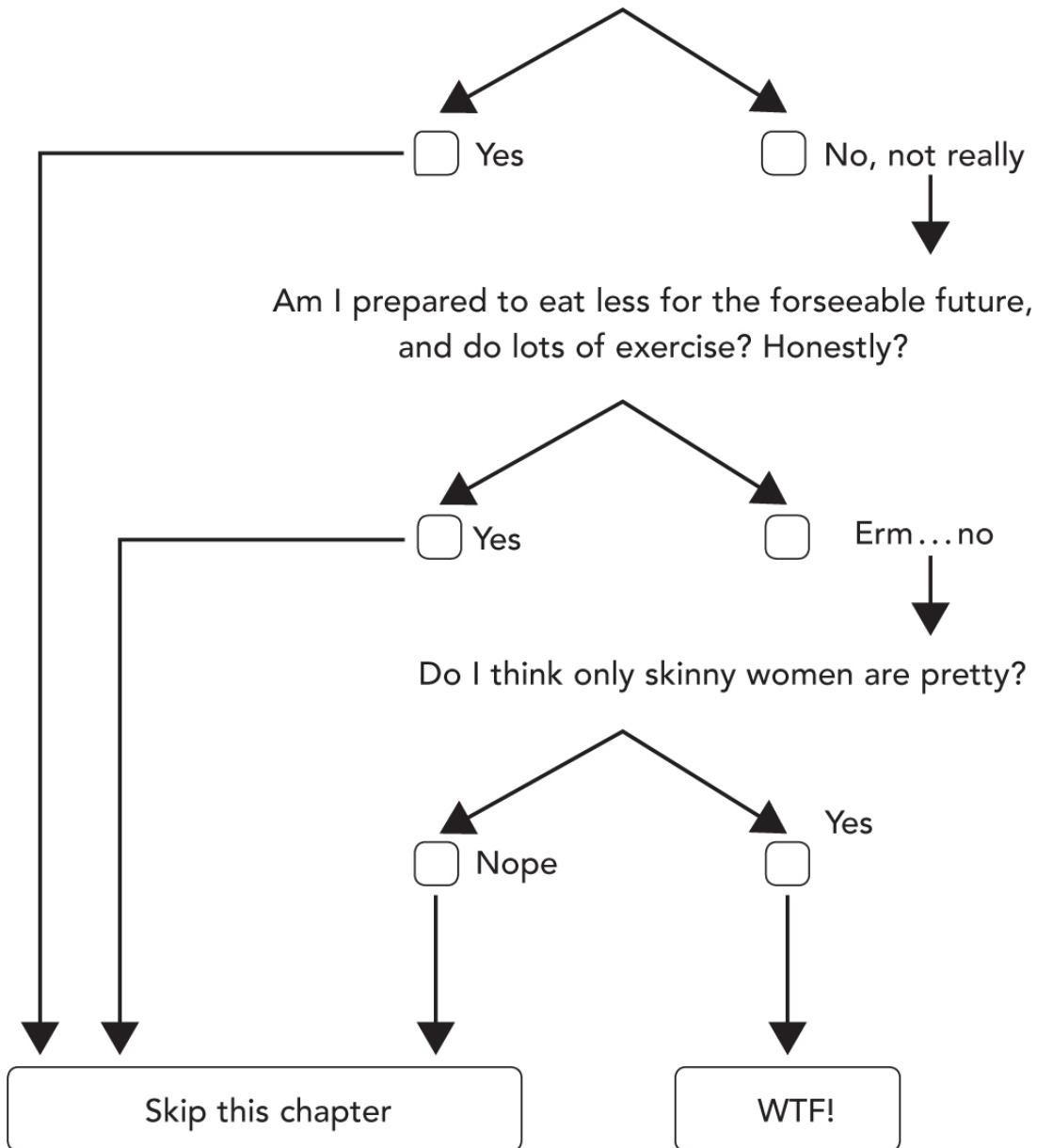
“A bikini body means that someone who has a body is wearing a bikini, nothing more,” I explain to Anne, who is sitting in the car with me. We are on our way to the lake to go swimming.

I will test out some new resolutions, so, for research purposes, I have taken a day off to go swimming with Anne. I explain to her my new determination not to give a damn about my figure when wearing a bikini. “Hey!” I protest, because as soon as I tell her this she gives my behind an ever-so-brief glance.

We arrive, put our towels down on the grass, and when Anne pulls her flimsy dress over her head, I immediately am incredibly envious of her long

and slender legs, her flat tummy, and her hip line, where no doughnut has ever docked. Anne is a vegan and only eats organic food. She goes without white sugar, white flour, lactose, and frozen food, not to mention the phase when she tried to live on only light. We still joke about that.

Do I have a bikini body, or something close to it?



In my next life I will have legs like that, and I will wear miniskirts, supertight skinny jeans, and hot pants.

“And in my next life, I will have cleavage,” Anne sighs. We have both brought a bikini, and I have barely jumped into mine and stood up in my

full splendor when I automatically pull my tummy in. If I could pull in my backside, my thighs, and my hips, I would do that too.

I exhale consciously and relax, and my belly slips into its normal place.

“Just lie down like when you go to sleep; that’s probably the most comfortable position,” Anne suggests, and it sounds all right.

“Well? How does it feel?” she asks after a few moments, while I am lying stiffly on my side.

“You know those pictures of beached whales?” I reply, and that is a very apt image. I don’t feel good. Not lying on my side, not sitting up, and definitely not sitting cross-legged. I am acutely aware of my various wrinkles and surplus fat jostling between me and my real shape, and it is making me miserable.

“Why do I find it so difficult to do without sugar, fat, and other such stuff? Or to resist a second dessert? Why can’t I get my buttocks to take part in one of those exercise-from-hell programs? Or, damn it, why can’t I wrap up the chocolate bar and put it away after having eaten one little piece?” I wail.

“Because you love chocolate,” someone says behind me. It is L., with his beach towel, the dog, and our son. L. has taken some time off and even brought us a giant watermelon.

There they are, grinning at me—and then, all of a sudden, there is no room for grumpiness anymore. I carry my son in his shark-patterned swimming trunks to the water. The dog is watching us, wagging his tail, and L. cuts the melon into slices. There is a fleeting thought, while my son and I are playing sea monsters, that my figure is not at its most advantageous like that, but then we squeal with laughter, and I forget it.

During the race back to the others I also forget that I probably don’t look like a gazelle, simply because I am laughing. I briefly wince when I sit down cross-legged to eat the melon, but as soon as I look at my loved ones, I feel happy and secure. It is strange. When I distract myself with a good feeling, of friendship, love, goodwill, and laughter, there is no room for negative thoughts.

Some brief glances to the left and right are also helpful, because you won’t be lying between Jennifer Lopez and Chris Hemsworth. I stop looking down at myself, but rather at the melon juice spreading over my son’s face. I look at L.’s bright eyes and listen to Anne’s funny story about

her last shamanic retreat.

As the sun gets more and more golden, I move closer to L., and together we watch Anne and our child throwing stones into the lake.

“Would you sometimes rather be slimmer, taller, more muscular, or somehow different?” I ask L.

He looks at me askance.

“Would *you* rather I was slimmer, taller, more muscular, or somehow different?” he replies.

I give him a quick scan from top to bottom, and no, I would not want him any other way. I want him exactly how he is.

“Then I don’t want to be different either,” says L.

When our son is sound asleep in his crib that evening and I am inhaling a second helping of ice cream (rocky road), not only am I happy about the lovely day we had, but I have also got an all-round tan, and not only on my tummy. And that is the reason why a pair of jeans, one size too small, lands in a recycling bag the next day with a loud *olé!* Maybe they will end up with Catherine and a few women’s magazines, and they can all complain among themselves.

Not giving a crap about your looks in general

Looks are a tricky issue. I remember a lightbulb moment when, as a teenager, I went shopping with my mother. All of a sudden, she stopped and looked at me completely flabbergasted—she had realized that on this lovely afternoon in this busy shopping center men were no longer looking at her but at me! *Wham!* It was as if someone had flipped a switch.

That day I assumed she was annoyed about it, but it was the opposite. When the surprise subsided, she was delighted.

“It is as if a burden has fallen from my shoulders,” she said, grinning.

As a teenager I could not understand this. What was liberating about not getting attention anymore? After all, that was the central point in one’s life, around which everything else revolved. If ever I become as old as her, I thought, science will have invented something that can stop me from looking old!

After a long and contemplative look in the mirror I can assure you that science hasn't achieved this. But now I can understand why my mother seemed so delighted that day. The burden she was shedding in the shopping center was one she had taken on herself. She too had tried to conform to an image of herself as a good-looking woman. That is hard work. And with time it gets even harder. Only when it seemed in vain could she let go of it and lean back, relaxed, thinking, "*I've finally left all that behind.*"

I haven't left it behind yet, but the idea of leaning back instead, and not using all sorts of aids and devices in an attempt to look radiant on a Monday morning, is simply too tempting.

We attend to our looks for other people. Always. When we claim that we would do all that stuff with eyeliner-mascara-concealer-powder just for ourselves, it is maybe due to the fact that in battle dress, with our armor on, we feel stronger when it comes to meeting the eyes of the world. That, no doubt, is a lovely feeling, but it ultimately stems from the fact that we care about the judgment of the person in the bakery, the person in the cafeteria, the other parents in the nursery school, and the checkout guy in the supermarket. We are admitting that their opinions regarding our looks matter. Not our politeness, reliability, spending power, or table manners.

If you want, you can dress and make yourself up to the hilt every morning. But whoever answers "Absolutely not!" to the question "Do you care about what Mr. Brown in the office or Ben's dad thinks about your eyelashes?" can really do without the elaborate paintwork every day. You could have another cup of coffee or a longer hot shower instead, without nicking your legs while shaving them in a hurry and causing a bloodbath on the bathroom carpet. You could even play another round of *Candy Crush* on the sofa! Doesn't that sound wonderful?

The next Sunday, when I step outside our house without makeup, in sweatpants and an oversized T-shirt, the garbage bag in one hand, I feel like Britney Spears in her wildest times. Only the paparazzi hiding in a tree are missing. To set myself apart from the winos in front of the supermarket down the road, already emptying mega bottles of hard cider, I have added a nice scarf to my outfit.