



## THE NUMBER ONE LESSON IN LIFE

The bedroom door was slowly opening. Roland imagined that it was either Stephanie, his wife, or Esmé, their nine-year-old daughter. It was less likely to be one of their teenage sons, Aaron or John. They might be up and on the move, keeping the strange hours that they did, but these days, having nearly reached their full-grown height and seeing themselves as adults, they were unlikely to involve him in their troubles.

Stephanie had been sleeping in the spare room lately. This wasn't because their relationship was deteriorating. (At least he didn't think so.) It was because she couldn't stand his snoring, which was apparently getting worse. Sometimes, however, if she woke up in the middle of the night – and he wasn't snoring – she would join him in the master bedroom.

'Hello? Roland?'

Good grief, it was his mother! She came into the room and sat on the end of the bed. Although his mother lived only a couple of streets away, and was the only person outside the house who possessed a key to the front door, it was still incredible to see her in such circumstances. The time could be anything between midnight and six in the morning.

'What are you doing here?' he asked.

'I don't know.' She appeared to be in a daze. 'One minute I was in bed and the next minute I was here.'

She looked younger and her face was bathed in a soft light. Clearly, Roland was having a dream. It was one of those unusual dreams from which, if necessary, he could wake up – for example, if the pleasant feeling that had invaded his senses were to turn sour. One interesting feature of the dream was that his mother was dressed in a white medieval chemise.

'I've been having these dreadful headaches lately,' she went on. 'Tonight, it was particularly bad. I felt this pounding in my head.'

'Do you want me to get you some tablets?'

'No, no, it won't do any good, darling. Trust me.'

He laughed at the thought that had just occurred to him. 'There is another way to look at it.'



'What's that?'

'Your headache doesn't exist. You're simply a part of my dream.'

She gazed at the front and back of her hands, as if she expected them to vanish before her eyes.

'What are you talking about, darling? I feel real enough. Are you sure that you're not a part of *my* dream?'

This really was an amazingly clever thing for him to get her to say!

'There must be a reason why I'm here,' she said, frowning. 'I must have something important to tell you.'

She was scatterbrained at the best of times, and in this dream she was acting true to form.

'One thing I can tell you at any rate,' she went on. 'It took me a long time to realize this over the course of my life but, as they say, it's better late than never. I'm free.'

'You're free?'

'Free to do whatever I like within the law. You're free as well, darling. You don't think you are – because you've got children to bring up, a mortgage to pay and a job to go to – but, believe me, if you want to change your job, if you want to move to a new house, you can. Unlike a lot of people, who don't always have these choices, we are very privileged.'

This wasn't his mother. She would never talk like this. No, this was a result of all the self-help books he had been reading lately, books with titles like *The Number One Lesson in Life*. Before long, she would probably tell him that the source of most of his anxiety was the result of living in the future or the past or that he needed to be his own best friend.

'I am here,' she said portentously, 'to give you the number one lesson in life.'

'Great!'

He decided that he would play along with her. This would be an interesting experience, his mother as Eckhart Tolle or Richard Carlson, telling him not to sweat the small stuff.

'I asked Granny Judy the same question when I was a child. "What's the number one lesson in life?" It's easy to discount the answer because any reply could be dismissed as a cliché.'

'What did Granny Judy say?'



‘Her words stuck with me over the years. Unfortunately, though, I didn’t pay much attention at the time. That’s what happens with the wisest sayings. You hear them and immediately forget all about them.’

‘Right.’ He was already thinking that this was a shaggy dog story. ‘You’re like one of those people on the Internet promising to reveal the secret to getting over your divorce or getting into shape – except that you never get around to divulging the one fundamental thing that transformed your life until the customer signs up and pays for access to your website.’

She chuckled. ‘I just want you to see the importance of what I’m about to say before I say it. You’ve been working too hard, darling. If you talk to people towards the end of their life, they always say the same thing. They regret working so hard and not spending more time with their kids.’

He immediately thought of Esmé and all the times he had told her that daddy was busy. Although his sons, aged 15 and 17, largely led their own lives, his daughter was still keen to play with him. She had adopted a habit lately of saying a word she had made up, ‘moy’, in various situations – often in response to something that she didn’t approve of – and which, apparently, meant different things depending on its pronunciation. His wife, Stephanie, had complained of feeling bored at times, too, and he felt guilty that they did not hang out together more (and when they did hang out, he was normally slumped on the sofa watching television).

‘So is that the number one lesson in life? Don’t work so hard?’

‘All I’m saying is that you’ve got a fantastic family. All of them, Stephanie, Aaron, John and Esmé, are lovely people.’

‘Aren’t you leaving someone out?’

‘Who?’

‘You.’

‘Yes, but I won’t be around forever, darling.’

‘Don’t talk like that.’

‘Quality, not quantity, of life is what counts.’

Good grief!

‘Even if one’s circumstances aren’t ideal,’ she went on, ‘everyone still has the capacity to be



happy. I was thinking the other day about whether your dad and I had a happy marriage.'

'And what did you conclude?'

'Yes, we did.'

'So what is the number one lesson in life?'

She was probably heading towards saying that happiness is a state of mind or words to that effect.

'I'm worried about you, darling. You're like your dad. You don't take care of your health.

Remember what happened to him?'

'Is *that* the number one lesson? To take care of your health?'

It was like trying to pin down a politician to an answer.

'You're putting on weight,' she replied. 'Remember you had that scare a couple of years ago. Also, you need to take care of your relationships. You need to talk more to Aaron. He's a little lost at the moment.'

'Is he?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know he's a little lost?'

He would get back to the number one lesson before long but, for the moment, this subject was more interesting and relevant.

'He doesn't want to admit it. He wants to be treated like a man.'

Roland sighed. He was not disputing what she was saying because, as he fully accepted, he did not understand his eldest son. Stephanie would talk about Aaron's sensitivity and his need for approval but, if Aaron was sensitive, he certainly put up a good pretence of not showing it. The argument about the party last Saturday – when he had ignored Roland's phone calls and text messages and just expected to be picked up at one o'clock in the morning – was a good example. Perhaps if he showed an adult's sense of responsibility and thought for once of other people...

But now Roland was only rehashing the past which, of course, was pointless.

'The trouble is,' he replied, 'I find him difficult to talk to.'

'Those who aren't the easiest to love are often the ones who need it the most.'



No human being spoke in this way. Maybe – another thought occurred to him – his mother was dead and he was talking to her ghost. That would explain why she was dressed in white and it would also explain her headache. Maybe she had had a fatal stroke overnight and was visiting him on her way to the afterlife. Strangely, he didn't feel as upset as he might have expected. It was difficult to grieve over someone who you were currently talking to. In any case, he would take her advice – if it was her advice – and chat to Aaron.

As for the number one lesson in life, he could probably work it out for himself if, as seemed likely, he would never get to hear it. The last book he had read had been Victor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. (This really was the strangest, most intelligent dream he had ever had – one in which he was analysing it as it went along!) Frankl had contended that the pursuit of happiness was about finding meaning, which varied from one individual to another.

'So, for the final time, what's the number one lesson in life? Or aren't you going to tell me?'

'The lesson is to count your blessings.'

'That's it? Count your blessings?'

'I told you it would be a disappointment. Believe me, though, when you get to my age, you realize it's the most important thing.'

His mother smiled beatifically and, oddly enough, although her advice had been a disappointment (as she had predicted), he felt a sense of unconditional love and acceptance.

He smiled in return as she left the room, at which point the door also closed upon his dream.

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The distinctive tap, tap-tap-tap would be her mother-in-law. She opened the front door to a grey-haired lady who, although in her seventies, kept herself in trim and probably weighed less than Stephanie herself.

'Hi, Audrey.'

'Hi. How is everything? Is he up?'

They were both talking in quiet voices.



'No, I deliberately let him sleep in. I slept in the spare room last night. I haven't even talked to him this morning.'

'How are the arrangements?'

'All prepared.'

She led Audrey into the kitchen and showed her the breakfast tray with the card sticking up in the middle.

'Where is everyone?'

'In their rooms. John gave me strict instructions not to get him up until the last minute. You know, Aaron specifically asked to be the first to greet his dad this morning. He's written a lovely message in his card. I think he feels guilty over their argument last weekend.'

'The one about coming back late from the party?'

'Yes.'

They went upstairs and woke the children up. John looked bleary-eyed through his long hair, and they had to wait for him to sign his card. In the meantime, Stephanie doubled back along the landing and pressed her ear against the door of the master bedroom.

'Weird,' she said on her return. 'It's very quiet in there. It's unusual for him not to be up at this time.'

Esmé entered John's room, jumping up and down with excitement. 'Dad is going to be so surprised!'

'Shhh!' Stephanie cautioned.

'Moy,' Esmé said under her breath.

They all gathered on the landing.

'OK, Aaron,' Stephanie whispered, 'you go in first and then we'll all yell out, "Happy Father's Day!"'

'Right.'

Aaron was a very serious man who had already grown a beard that sprouted out of his chin. He waited for everyone to get into position outside the master bedroom and then opened the door. The words 'Happy Father's Day' were shouted and then Stephanie dropped the tray.



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