



(Teotwawki).  
Clémentine Coupau

He had spent his night imagining the best emergency exit solution in case of fire. Not through the entrance door, for the staircase leading to the main entrance was made of wood. That was the thing that kept him awake. The entire apartment was made of wood. Wooden floors, wooden doors, wooden frames. Apart from the solid concrete slab in the kitchen, everything was built with wood. The furniture, too. Most of it was composed of wooden parts. There were the pieces of second-hand furniture made of oak or pine and then there was the self-made furniture made from wooden panels bought at the local hardware store. Wooden panels that were made from sustainable Eucalyptus, Portuguese forest wood, as the label specified it. Eucalyptus that is actually Australian and was introduced in Europe during the 18th Century for ornamental reasons.

Eucalyptus, that now covers about 900 000 hectares of Portuguese forest. Eucalyptus, which have thin trunks with steep branching. Eucalyptus, of which leaves and bark are very flammable.

He had thought of two viable exit routes. The balcony of the living-room in the back of the apartment, overlooking the yard; and the balcony-like space of the bedroom, in the front, facing the street.

The balcony in the back was quite spacious. Enough to welcome two chairs, a small table and a mid-sized flower box. It also offered great views into the different backyards of the housing block. One could see a turtle eating its salad down in a garden on the left. Further left, occasionally, a man cleaning his swimming-pool (though no one had ever, ever seen him swimming in it). Further still, one could not see but hear a family, two or three kids between 4 and 7 years old, and their parents speaking and yelling in Dutch. On the right side, on a lower-end balcony, a woman and her collection of bonsai trees; while contemplating and caring for them she would always smoke a large Cuban cigar.

But in the back, how would one rescue them if the whole building was burning? How would the firemen reach them? Would it even make

sense? What type of fire were we even talking about?

The lurking clock ticking and with his forties approaching he was prone to several insomnias per week. During one of the recent ones, he had made a list of items he would take with him in case he would have to evacuate from a disaster. He had not any particular type of disaster in mind and his list mixed both survival supplies and personal items. What if he couldn't get back home?

He was echoing and looping to these insomniac interrogations some nights ago, when he was questioning his relationship. When does one leave? When does one know when one must leave?

Measuring with the extremities of his hands while keeping his cigarette in his mouth he realized that the balcony in the front could welcome only two adults of rather thin silhouettes. Only two thin standing bodies. The window was not completely closed, as from the balcony, outside, one couldn't really close it. A persistent smell of cigarette (it wasn't a cigarette though, it was a lot of tobacco rolled up with crumbs of old weed) reached her nostrils and woke her up.

She had spent her night dreaming about her forthcoming colonoscopy. In her dream she was travelling inside her own bowels, together with the doctor, her mother and her grandfather. They were looking at the space just like at a house under construction. Admiring how shiny and healthy the lining was. The doctor, guiding them through like a real estate agent, was comparing it with her grandfather's and commented: "You see, with him, it's exactly here that was the main tumour, and here on the contrary: nothing! Pure clean flesh. Beautiful!".

Her grandfather had died aged 61 of a generalized colo-rectal cancer. He was a tiler. He had spent his life installing layers of tiles in people's houses. It was unclear if his cancer was due to alcohol use, inhalation of toxic substances through his work or actually just plain genetics. When he died, her mother discovered not only that one of her cousins was in fact her sister, but also that she had inherited a pretty advanced colo-rectal cancer herself. Her bowel lining had been carefully tiled with a collection of benign polyps and malign metastases.

Before the colonoscopy, for the test to be performed properly, the patient must follow a three-day strict low-fiber diet and conclude with a

laxative preparation. Surfaces must be clean.

Cleaning surfaces was her job. The company she was working for had a contract with a building sheltering the headquarters of different organizations from the tertiary sector. Commercial service providers. Four nights a week she would be vacuum cleaning a stone-grey carpet, black leather office chairs and orange meeting room sofas; dusting desks, computers, keyboards, telephone bases and handsets, straightening documents, pens and other items left on the tables, collecting and removing rubbish.

While going through her nightly checklist she would listen to music or audiobooks but most of the time she would be on the phone conversing with her sister. They would speak about their father getting old and their relationships getting rotten. She had recently got some airpods and it was so convenient. Discreet and wireless, it was not falling off when she would bend.

Sometimes she would meet some people staying late at work. Zealous or overworked, she never really knew. For some she was just an automat; part of the building's night choreography. But mostly they were condescendingly nice. Smiling, telling her how they always clean their table before they leave and asking about her children even though she had none.

The company she worked for had recently changed their cleaning products to eco-friendly alternatives. It was in the air. Marketing-wise it sounded better for soliciting new clients and it gave the long established ones a clearer conscience. About a year ago they had finished their stock of chemical detergents and replaced it with certified natural detergents.

She knew it was for the better; for her colleagues, for herself. She was still using bleach for the toilets, though. At the end of the day it had to look clean, it had to be clean. That's what she was here for. She would buy the bleach herself and bring it to work, hiding it on her trolley. She had thought about it and had come to the conclusion that no products could beat bleach as an antibacterial. Also, bleach made the ceramic look white and shiny.

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The bedside table was a rather large crossed legged table, painted in light green and varnished, though one could still see the veins of the pine wood through the green. Behind the digital clock was a framed picture of a woman posing in a forest green leather sofa. The green of the sofa fitted harmoniously the green of the table. The woman's hair was frizzy dark but straightened, cut above the shoulders. She was wearing red bakelite earrings and an assorted red woolen pull-over.

She was her grandmother and she had died twenty-two years after this picture had been taken.

Across the bed was an old chest of drawers in which were kept underwear in the upper drawer and jumpers in the lower drawer.

In the lower drawer, between a grey cashmere round neck and a black polyamide turtle neck, was folded the red woolen pull-over worn by the grandmother in the framed picture. This pullover was one of the items she had been allowed to keep when she died.

It was pure Irish lambswool. The grimy label on the collar specified it. Very warm. Since she had gotten it she had never washed it. It still smelled like her grandmother. It smelled like her perfume, her skin and the soap she used to use. She had decided she would only wear it at home and no longer than a couple of hours in a row. She was worried that the smell would go away.

And it did already quite a bit to be honest.

She shared her flat with a small but steady colony of *Tineola bisselliella*. They were golden looking common cloth moths that she had transported from her previous apartment to the one she inhabited now. She had tried everything to get rid of them but she only managed to contain their presence. From all the repellent and eradication techniques she had tried, what worked best to her surprise was spraying a mix of cedar and lavender essential oil onto the furniture. It kept them at a distance and had to be done regularly. The smell was nice; quite pleasant but quite present.

It would take over any other smell.

Impose itself.

The lavender smell had almost replaced the blend of perfume and soap. And, just like most of her woolen pull-over the red Irish lambswool pull-over had suffered moth larvae feeding damage. The sign of their passage was easily recognizable, a small hole on the chest, on the right side, always. It seemed meticulously chosen, premeditated.

As she ascribed intentions to the moths, she also ascribed nuisance intentions to the inhabitants of the adjoining building. She was sharing a badly insulated wall with them. Not with their apartment but with their staircase hall, their corridor and their elevator. From her bed she could hear the mechanism of the elevator. Always. Always, she thought, people would use it in the middle of the night. From down to up, up to down.

It was unclear. Was it her intestine mimicking the noise of the elevator? Or was she sensitive to the elevator because her insides were going up and down, up and down, up and down. Not sure.

But it kept her awake.

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Technically I should separate these two moments. But I always go about it like this. Not that it offers an excuse, it's more to underline how natural, how obvious it seems to me. From cleaning myself I feel the urge to get the bathtub clean. With my nails I get the dead skin out of my back, it's pretty easy with the steam, it's just like in a hamam. And then I just do the same for the tub. From one surface to another. Naturally. I get the grime off. First I scratch with my nails and then I grab the scrub sponge. And I scrub harder.

I rinse it all afterwards with hot water. And then cold water. They say cold water tightens the skin, it might as well help the bathtub look good. Sometimes I add a bit of baking powder and white vinegar. It gives it a shine.

My grandmother used baking powder for her teeth. It gave them a shine.

Once I scrubbed my face so hard I felt I disappeared.