

Evaluation Sample

CAROLINE

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Once that has been said, enjoy!

Chapter I

The alarm clock had been ringing for at least two minutes by the time a cautious hand groped out to silence it. Two little eyes opened with difficulty and closed again almost at once. A blonde head snuggled back down to rest comfortably on its pillow, letting reality slowly make its way in. Finally, Caroline drew herself up in her bed, briefly wondering, in a moment of panic, what time it could be. Fortunately, it was only eight o'clock.

Sighing, she made her first effort to get up, but did not succeed. She knew too well what awaited her after she was ready. Her small counter, the deposit approval seal and an endless round of people coming one after another without pause. In less than an hour and a half, little Caroline would transform herself into a teller.

Still, it was Friday. The weekend was approaching and, more to the point, an evening spent dancing. At this thought, Caroline perked up enough to definitively come to life. Moving towards the shower, she tried, after a fashion, to forget that that wonderful future would have to wait until the end of another painful day at the National Bank.

She had gone out the night before, in spite of it being

Thursday, with her sister Judith. The latter was studying in Quebec City and was visiting her hometown for two days, one of which had been dedicated to Caroline. The outing had made her feel better. Her sister, who she used to be very close to, was a year younger and had left their small town—like so many others—to adopt city life.

Judith worried a lot about her older sister. It seemed to her that she was always either alone or with imbeciles. For the past while, she had been following from afar the progression of her affair with Charles. The latter had been charming during the first few weeks and, although pushy, appeared to respect Caroline's wish to take her time. But Caroline had finally admitted to her sister that she had discovered that the handsome Charles was married.

At least this time it hadn't been Judith who had had to break the news to her. Twice already, she had discovered the truth and had had to announce it to Caroline. Either she was truly unlucky or she wanted, somewhere deep inside herself, to remain alone. Judith didn't know and at moments she despaired for her sister.

Caroline finished her shower and decided to get dressed before breakfast. She went through her whole wardrobe. There were some nice pieces, but the choice was limited. She was not rich and, being only twenty-four, she did not have the advantage of years of accumulation. She took out one suit, then another. She quickly put them back.

The clothing struggle lasted a few minutes, reproducing itself almost identically with each piece. The main reason she couldn't make a choice was simply that she didn't have her mind on the job at hand. She was thinking that, with each

completed task, she was getting unpleasantly closer to work. This thought made her feel guilty and she chastised herself. She chose a pullover which looked nice with her black pants... but gave up that idea too.

Finally, Caroline, fully dressed, went into the kitchen. Breakfast was easy. She always ate the same thing. At home, that is. At the restaurant, she had more imagination, but when it was a question of making something to eat, the law of least effort won every time. Milk bottle in hand, she grabbed the box of Corn Flakes and the sugar bowl, and plunked herself down to eat her cereal.

She ate slowly. Caught between her wish to avoid having her flakes get soggy and taking her time, she nevertheless managed to finish within a reasonable amount of time. She was unfortunately running out of things to do before going to work. Momentarily, luck was on her side as her roommate, Tracy, decided to get up early.

“Hello gorgeous,” Caroline exclaimed.

“Hello,” Tracy answered sleepily, with her slight British accent.

“Did you sleep well?”

“Not bad. I sacked out early. You weren’t even back yet.”

“I was with Judith. We had a lot of things to talk about. When I got back I thought you were with Patrick.”

“No, I didn’t feel like it yesterday. In fact, I’m wondering if it’s not about time to put an end to that affair.”

“How come?”

“I don’t know. It seems to me that when I think about him now, I don’t really care whether I’m with him or not. I’m starting to wonder if I’m staying with him just out of habit.

Even though we've been together for three months I still have the impression that we're strangers."

"I told you all he wanted was to sleep with you."

"That's not completely true. It sure is a big part of it, but there's more to it than that. And, to be frank, I'm not one to talk. I mean, it was more or less what I wanted in the beginning too. It's rather like we've both told ourselves that, since we were attracted to one another the same way, it would be really easy to fall in love. But it seems like we live on different planets."

"Oh well. So, he's beefcake and that's it."

"Yes, more or less. It's gotten to the point that when I'm going to see him I have to prepare things to talk about. Otherwise, we can't think of anything. I don't think that's normal for a couple that might spend the rest of their lives together."

"No, I don't think so either," Caroline ended up saying, thoughtful.

The two friends remained silent for a few moments before Tracy started again:

"Gawd! What a ghastly early morning conversation!"

"Yeah! You're right. Let's talk about it later. What are you doing up at this hour anyway?"

"Nothing special. I just wanted to wander about or maybe do some cleaning up. Speaking of time; you'll be late if you don't hurry a bit."

"Shit! You're right."

On this, Caroline completed her preparations and hustled out to face the new day.

* * *

Franck had been busy for several minutes rummaging in the wooden trunk that contained all the scores he kept as back-ups. He was searching for an old Supertramp song “Lord, is it mine?” that he soon hoped to play on a trip outside of their usual circle.

He would, of course, have to convince his partner Claude Stone, the pianist and cofounder of the Talent Tour duo, who didn’t like this type of song much. Franck was confident he would accept. After all, they had been working together for nearly fourteen years.

At the beginning, they had assembled a group of four musicians, all about the same age and native to the village. However, the two other members, less gifted, left early on to join the ranks of the “normal workforce.” At first a little disappointed, Claude and Franck persevered and the never-ending improvement of synthesizers and electronic drums allowed them to take their fate into their own hands.

They were working a lot in the region and had slowly become the main attraction in half a dozen clubs within a radius of less than a hundred kilometers. They also occasionally gave shows in Quebec City and in some distant small towns. Those trips were longer but at least then they got to play in the same place several evenings in a row.

Franck was searching vigorously, pawing through sheets full of little black notes and annotations in his own hand and putting aside magnetic tapes containing samples for the synthesizers. He cursed again over his lack of order and regretted, as usual, not having persisted in his last attempt at

cataloguing everything.

Jennifer, his wife, entered his workshop, which used to be their old double garage. Franck stopped abruptly and watched her advance. He didn't like to be disturbed when he was working and Jennifer, after many arguments, had finally understood this and generally left him alone. It must be something important.

"Franck. Sorry to bother you, but there's someone for you on the phone."

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. She didn't give me her name. She seemed on the verge of crying."

"Ok, fine. I'm coming," he said, preoccupied. "Jenny, can you do me a favor?"

"Of course, dear. What do you want me to tell her?"

"No not that. I'm going. It's just that I've been looking for 'Lord, is it mine?' for half an hour. Could you try to find it? You might have a luckier touch than me."

"Okay," she accepted, a little surprised. "I did offer to organize your stuff, Franck. It would be so much simpler."

"Yes, yes, we'll talk about it later."

Franck did not delay any longer. On his way he crossed paths with Sebastian, his eight-year-old first-born son. He was coming with his baseball glove and Franck remembered that he had promised to spend some time with the boy before leaving. But this was not the time and he sent him to join his mother in the workshop, to his great astonishment, since the place was usually out of bounds to him and his younger brother.

Arriving in the house almost at a run, he picked up the

phone.

“Yes, hello?”

“Hello, Franck. It’s so good to hear your voice.”

“Veronica!” he exclaimed, trying to whisper, prey to the beginnings of panic. “Are you crazy? I told you never to call me here. The last thing we need right now is an actual crisis.”

“I know, but I miss you. So much that it hurts. I need you. I need to know that we’ll be together. Not just for a day or two. For ever. That’s all I’m asking. I don’t want to provoke things; I just need to have some hope and confidence.”

“Yes, Ronnie dear. I understand perfectly well the situation you’re in. How do you think I feel? It’s really hard for me too. I have to think about the children.”

“I know. Forgive me. I don’t know what I’m doing anymore. I’m so unhappy. Franck, if only you knew...” she started, sobbing.

She was now crying with deep heart-wrenching sobs. It sounded like she had been holding her tears for as long as she could, but now they had to come out. Franck was listening, caught between two feelings. His heart was aching for his distressed mistress but he was also desperate to end this conversation. What if Jennifer was listening using the bedroom phone? No, he would have seen her enter. Moreover, that wasn’t her style at all.

“Ronnie... Ronnie... Stop crying, please.”

“I love you,” she simply said, weeping even more.

Franck moved the phone away a few moments. He had to find something to say and fast. It was especially important that he find the right words so this scene would never be repeated.

“Listen to me, Ronnie. I’m playing tonight. I’ll call you from there. In the meantime, stop crying. We’ll sort it out somehow, maybe quicker than you think. But don’t call here again. It’s beneath you. You’re disappointing me.”

“I’m so sorry,” she answered him in a small halting voice, full of tears. “I’ll wait for your call. I love you and give you a huge kiss.”

“Me too, bye.”

Once he had hung up, Franck took a few seconds to gather his wits. He had had a narrow escape. Poor Veronica. So nice and so affectionate. What a bummer to be just one man. Still, she had to realize that he wasn’t available for the moment. Perhaps one day... Until then, she just had to wait and hope. He had even encouraged her to take on a boyfriend while waiting. Even though he loved her, he would understand. It wasn’t his fault that she was clinging to him.

He moved towards his workshop, astonished not to have seen his wife yet. He found her sitting on the ground, a pile of music sheets on her left, another one on her right, their son climbing on her shoulders.

“Never mind Jenny, I think it’s already in the van.”

“Now you tell me.”

“I’m sorry. I had forgotten.”

“No problem. I have nothing else to do. Just the dinner, the washing, the garbage... Who was that?”

“Oh! No one important. A girl that Claude met on our last tour in Quebec City. He hadn’t left her his number and she was trying to reach him. Since mine is listed, she figured she could get it from me.”

“You gave it to her?”

“I had to. Otherwise I’d still be on the phone. She sounded hysterical. If I hadn’t given in, she’d just have kept calling.”

“Poor girl...”

“Not really. She’s a groupie. They’re used to that kind of situation.”

Jennifer slowly moved closer to her husband. He made an effort not to pull away. He knew what was coming.

“And you, Franck, do you meet a lot of them?”

“Of course. As many as Claude. We do work together. Only, I’m not like him. I don’t like to take advantage of the circumstances. I’m a musician because I love music, not because I want to seduce little nymphets, who often have one wheel in the sand.”

“But, Claude, he takes advantage of it.”

“Yes and no. It’s hard to judge. After all, they’re more than willing. Moreover, Claude’s single. He’s perfectly entitled to jump on good opportunities.”

“Perhaps...”

She stopped and embraced her husband.

“Don’t tell me you’re still worrying about that! Frankly Jenny, at the beginning I could understand it, but after all this time, you should know me better than that.”

“I know. But what do you expect? A woman’s always worried. I’m not getting any younger, and bars are full of gorgeous teenagers just waiting for an Apollo to take them with him. And that phone call... There’s always a little something bringing my doubts back to the surface.”

Franck held her harder, tenderly kissing her. How he loved his Jenny!

“Get all that out of your mind. I love you so much. And

what about the children? Do you seriously believe I could love any other woman than the mother of my children? Sebastian, get down from there!” Franck exclaimed suddenly.

It was already too late. Sebastian, whom they had forgotten, had decided to climb on a speaker to reach his father’s first guitar, which hung proudly on the wall. Losing his footing, he fell on the concrete floor. Fortunately not from very high. Making a supreme effort not to cry—a big boy doesn’t cry—his lips were nevertheless trembling and his eyes wet. He put the fallen speaker back in its place and, pushing his mother away—she was coming to comfort him—he left with as much dignity as he could muster.

Franck and Jennifer burst into laughter. Soon normality fell back into place and Jennifer seized the moment.

“Franck, you promised me you would go and pay Hydro on Monday.”

“Well, I went. What are you talking about?”

“You’re such a bad liar, Franck Sheep. I went to the bank this morning and there was no transaction for that amount.”

“Ah, yes, forgive me. I forgot. I’ll do it this afternoon when I leave town with Claude. We pass right in front of the bank.”

“You had better do it. And worse, you didn’t call for the chimney. If you don’t do anything about it, we won’t be able to use it this winter.”

“Don’t exaggerate. It’s not that bad.”

“Goddamn it. If the chimney isn’t cleaned properly, we’ll set fire to the house. You... sometimes... you need to come down from the clouds once in a while. Lucky for you I’m here, otherwise you’d be lost.”

“You’re perfectly right, my dear guardian angel.”

“And, now that I’m thinking of things, weren’t you supposed to get new shoes? Are you waiting for that pair to fall apart? And to think that you go on stage with those things! Lord, there are times when I’m so ashamed. But don’t come back with brown running shoes like you bought in Quebec City. Good God! What were you thinking that day?”

Before Franck could defend himself, Jennifer continued:

“I just realized... You only wear them when you go to Quebec City. Is there some particular reason why you do that?”

“Well, yes, I already told you. I like to take long walks there, and it’s a lot more comfortable doing it with soft runners than with hard shoes.”

“Huh... Yes, I know, I was just teasing you. You can wear them as much as you want in Quebec City. I don’t know anyone over there. Chances are slim that you’ll meet a woman from here who might think that I bought those ‘things’ for you. Or maybe they’d think that I’ve done it on purpose to make sure you won’t fool around. Good God! Bla, bla, bla, dinner will be late. It should be ready in forty-five minutes. See you later.”

“Later.”

By now Franck was feeling good. Very good, actually. He had skillfully averted a catastrophe. It had even, ultimately, turned to his advantage because it had allowed him to reassure his wife. Moreover, Veronica’s tears had invigorated him. It feels good to be loved so much, he told himself.

For a brief moment, a dramatic image came to him. He saw Veronica, lying close to an empty bottle. He couldn’t decipher the label but could easily guess the contents. Despair filled the comatose face, and in the background he imagined

ambulance' sirens. He drove out the distasteful vision. It wasn't the scene itself that he found disturbing, but the fact that it somehow pleased him.

Pulling himself back together, he focused on Veronica's marvelous smile. He had met her two months before while they were giving a concert in the old capital. She had seduced him with that smile. The grin literally lit her face when she looked at him with those loving eyes. What a nice girl! What an appetite for life! Hardly twenty years old; ten less than him. How unimportant that was when the heart is there!

She was definitely better than Heather, another one he'd met there. The latter had gotten tired of waiting and had decided to turn over a new leaf. The last time he had seen her, the very same day he met Veronica, she had been ice-cold. He still couldn't think about it without a small shiver. The charges he had read in her eyes had terrified him. It was so unfair! They had loved each other so much that he would never have believed that such a cloud could ever interpose itself between them.

At least he had a clean conscience. After all, it wasn't his fault that he had met his wife first. If they had never had children, maybe... But what was she hoping to accomplish? They were in love, but it couldn't go any further. He had never hidden anything from her. Bah! It wasn't important. She was history. Veronica was something else. On the other hand, that phone call could mean the beginning of problems. That she was longing for him was one thing, but bothering him at home and compromising his family life? That was an entirely different story.

In any case, he had a show to prepare. Or, at least, he had

to make sure that everything they needed was already in the truck. The show changed very little from one performance to another. A bit each of Supertramp, Rolling Stones, Queen, and Genesis. A load of songs ready for special requests. And there they were, ready to be the glory of the town.

* * *

Pauline was moving towards the sound. She had just heard a small noise and had immediately recognized it. It was that of a little girl trying to be quiet because she was doing something strictly forbidden. Progressing quickly, but stealthily to catch the young criminal red-handed, the mother approached the living room.

Stepping on a small rubber duck, her cover was blown and of course the noise made the little one flee, leaving her mother's hand bag open. Pauline was discouraged. If she had caught her with her hand in the bag—literally—she could have lectured her more easily. Now it would be more difficult. Victoria, her daughter, had the terrible habit of denying any misdeed, even when they were obvious. She found her in her room playing with some blocks as if nothing had happened.

“Vicky, what were you doing in my bag? I told you before never to play with it.”

“I didn't touch your bag. You're always accusing me all the time. It's not fair.”

“Oh sure. After toying with my bag, you're going to play with my nerves. I don't know what's keeping me from...”

The phone rang and Pauline moved towards it, delivering a warning:

“Don't think you're getting away with this. I want you to

think about what you've done and just wait until I come back."

At the third ring, she took the receiver off the hook.

"Hello."

"Hello, Pau-Pau, it's Caroline."

"Hey, hello princess. Are you at the bank?"

"Yes. I'm on my break. That means we won't be able to talk long. I just wanted to see if you'd like to go out tonight."

"On such short notice, I don't think so. I'll have to check with John."

"Come on, it'll be fun. It's been such a long time."

"I know, but when you're married, especially with children, you can't just take off like that."

"Don't exaggerate how tied down you are either."

"I know, I know. Let's just say that I would be very surprised if we could go out tonight."

"Too bad. Next week, then?"

"Yes, that's more likely. Let's do that. We'll forget it for today, but I'll try to convince John for next Friday."

"Okay then. It's a date."

"Deal. Apart from that, how are things going?"

"Same as usual. Guess what happened with Charles?"

"No! You're not serious. He's married?"

"Yes, Ma'am! Another one. This is getting discouraging."

"I understand, sweetie. Tell me; wasn't your sister supposed to be in town for the weekend?"

"She arrived yesterday, but she's leaving tomorrow because she has a big exam on Monday and she wants to study for it."

"It's a funny idea to take summer courses. It seems to me that one of the biggest advantages of going to school is to be free four months of the year."

“Yeah... But it allows her to get her degree sooner.”

“I guess she knows what she’s doing.”

“Yeah. My break is over now. I have to go.”

“Okay. Have a nice afternoon, and go out for the two of us tonight.”

“I’ll do that. Bye.”

“Bye,” Pauline replied before hanging up.

She moved towards the kitchen and had a glass of water. Going out would have been pleasant. However, she had a premonition that John would need to be worked on for a whole week before he accepted the idea. He probably had his whole evening planned already. Television and four beers. The latter were part of a ritual these days.

At the beginning, he used to exceed the limit regularly. She had quickly become upset with losing her husband four evenings out of seven and he had accepted to limit himself to four. Especially after their daughter had been born. Pauline had made him realize that he would need a cool head; otherwise he might never forgive himself, if something terrible ever happened.

Yet, a small outing as a couple would certainly do them some good. John was a fairly closed man, although he had always known when to show her his affection so that she could feel the love he was keeping deep inside him. But for some time now, he seemed to have become almost indifferent. Just for some time? No, if she were really honest with herself, she would have to admit that this situation had been going on for more than a year, but she pushed the thoughts away, since they only made her sadder.

It was probably just a phase and perhaps it was her that

had changed and was demanding too much of him. She had chosen to raise her daughter full-time and had stopped working. That had seemed a good idea at the time. She wasn't so sure about that anymore. Next year, Victoria would be going to school and it would then certainly be possible to re-enter the job market.

She missed it terribly. She had been a receptionist for six years at the Hotel and she knew she was good at it. The customers had always liked her and even the grumpy old man—the owner—found little to complain about. It wasn't at all like being with her mother who was constantly harping on everything she did “wrong” with her daughter's education. Or her husband, who sighed every time she had the misfortune of forgetting to do something or ran out of time.

Leaving these reflections, she turned the television on and settled on the couch, having completely forgotten that she had unfinished business with Victoria.

* * *

Claude arrived a little before three o'clock. As they had nearly two hours on the road and two more of installation ahead, he wasn't too early. Franck handed his baseball glove to Sebastian so he could go and store it with his own. Although the boy was a little disappointed that their playing session was over, he had at least had his father to himself for a good hour and he was happy with that. The two musicians took half an hour to go through their final checklist. The good-byes were short, Franck being already in his musical “trance” as his wife called it, which, in fact, was nothing more than a furious desire to see the country. They hit the road.

Claude was very different from Franck. Franck was big and strong, easily confused for the doorman in most clubs they worked in, where Claude was of average height and a bit on the skinny side. However, his numerous conquests were striking proof that he wasn't ugly.

Though he was rather handsome, Claude didn't have the presence or air of depth that Franck possessed. These things gave him the look of a prince charming, of a liberator. In other words, Franck was not only able to seduce a woman; he could make her fall deeply in love with him.

"You'll never guess what happened," Franck suddenly said.

"What?"

"Veronica called me at home today!"

"What? Does Jenny know about it?"

"She's the one who answered."

"Wow! How did you get out of it? If you did."

"I told her it was one of your girlfriends trying to get your phone number."

"Hey! I already told you that I hate it when you use me for your stories."

"I know. But it was the only good excuse I could think of. That's why I was in such a hurry to leave. I was afraid she'd ask you some questions, you know, like 'did you receive news from Quebec City today?' or something."

"Well. You got out of it nicely. It's funny the way you carry on too! I have nothing against having a quick affair, that's not too bad, I'm the first one to go for that, but you let your affairs run on for way too long. They cling to you and after, it's harder to shake them off."

"I know, but I can't help it. As soon as I see them, ready to

give me their life, to do everything for me so I'll be happy for the rest of my life, I can't help falling for them. And when I'm in love, I don't think straight. It's only after some time that I realize that, in the end, I'm always way better off with Jenny. Especially with the kids."

"Yeah. You're weird."

Both remained pensive. Claude broke the silence:

"It's true that Ronnie has quite a nice ass."

For the next few seconds, the only sound was the squealing of the van's tires braking abruptly. Before Claude had time to recover and sit back, Franck was already yelling at him:

"I told you never to say things like that. Veronica is an extraordinary girl and I love her very much. It's not my fault if I'm married and I have children. Will you ever understand that? I know you don't give a damn about love. All you want in life is to screw as often as possible, with as many girls as you can, whoever they are. You get drunk because you're afraid that when you see them in the motel room light you'll lose your hard on. Well, I'm not like that. Will you finally get that through your thick head and stop saying dirty things about the woman I love?"

Franck stopped, waiting for a reply. It came slowly, jerkily.

"Damn! You could have killed us. Don't you ever do anything like that again, Franck Sheep, ever. I apologize for what I said, but it wasn't a good enough reason to slam the brakes on like that right in the middle of the road."

"You're right. You're right. But I meant what I said. We'll talk about it tomorrow. Now, I just want to get there and make some music."

"No problem. We'll talk tomorrow."