

Vanilla

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Because life
is more
than just breathing

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This book didn't just happen because of my inexhaustible inspiration, drivenness and fantasy, but also thanks to:

- my wife Mandy and my daughter Robin, who gave me the me-time I needed to write, erase, write more and erase more ...
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It's hard to believe how fast the summer holidays went by. It seems like only yesterday I got my school results, and today I get up, get dressed, and go back to school. That's how it feels anyway.

One year higher, the 3rd grade, with almost the same classmates as last year. Since school is only a couple of hundred yards away from home, I walk there every day.

'Hey Leon, how was your holiday?' Henry shouts from a distance.
'Yeah all right' I answer him with a smile.

I really like Henry. We've known each other since primary school. Since high school he dresses himself like he comes straight out of a fashion magazine, with matching shoes and socks. Come to think about it: he is more elegant than most girls I know. Even his schoolbag is elegant! In the winter he will wear a matching scarf, hat and gloves, whilst I just grab something out of the winter basket and wear whatever will keep me warm.

Aah, there's my neighbour Emma. Of course I've seen her a lot in the holidays, but today she looks twice as nice as usual. Too bad she's a year younger, or I would try to sit next to her in class.

She looks even skinnier than in the summer holidays. Maybe it's her sun-tanned skin that seems to slim her? We kissed last week. Very sweet and gentle. I don't know if it suits a teenage boy to say that it was sweet, but it was.

'Leon, return from dreamland, you've been gaping at Emma for at least ten minutes! Is she still your muse?' I hear Ann shout.

If only you knew, Ann, if only you knew, I think.

'Will you be sitting next to me in class again?' she asks.

'Of course, I'd love that!' I reply, and we go to the mark on the playground where our class is supposed to line up.

Ann is my best friend. I've known her since primary school. She's very smart and beautiful. Really beautiful. She's got the appearance of a moviestar but she's very modest. She has brown hair, usually with plaits, a sun-tanned skin - especially after the summer holidays - a nice figure and a very sweet character. I realise that. They say that girls mature faster than boys. Ann is the living proof of that. She knows things. She feels things.

She's the perfect woman to be with, but I only feel lots and lots of friendship for her. Weird, isn't it? Nearly all the boys from our class fancy her and want to sit next to her, to catch a whiff of her smell, and here she is, asking me to sit next to her - because I'm safe.

We think the world of each other, but that's it. Maybe that's hard to understand, but friendship and love don't have a correct definition. I think it's the attraction that makes the difference. You are or are not attracted to someone. Like me and Emma. Aww, look at her standing there, with the other young adults who go to the second class. My body responds. I turn myself with my tummy towards the person in front of me so no one will see the answer.

In the classroom I go and sit next to Ann. She shows me her leather pencil case. Completely blank, ready for the school year and to be written on by a black ballpoint pen.

We wink at each other, and I take out my pencil case (exactly the same) and put a black ballpoint next to it. The school year starts.

The classroom door opens and the Head, Miss Jones, comes in with a woman in her forties, I guess. 'Dear students ...!' she says, and it seems like she wants to attract our attention by looking all nineteen of us separately in our eyes.

'Good morning,' she continues, let me introduce your new teacher of Expressive Thinking, Miss Woods. She will teach you for two hours per week, the first period on a Wednesday, like today. She is your trust teacher, so if you have problems she is the person to whom you can always turn to.'

Ann and I look surprised at each other. Expressive Thinking? Is that in our curriculum? Our Head seems to read our faces and replies: 'Expressive Thinking is a part of the drawing / music / drama curriculum. I would like to explain it to you but I am convinced that Miss Woods is more than capable of that. I trust that you will all treat her correctly and will be cooperative in the classroom.'

Miss. Jones turns around, leaves the classroom, and leaves us with the '*Expressive Thinking teacher*'.

It's quiet in the classroom. No one knows what to expect, so everyone stares at her, full of expectation.

She does look quite alright: a beautiful figure, light brown short hair, somewhat special clothing but no colourful hippy clothes like some of those so called dissident artists wear. She has a brown leather bag in which our pencil cases would disappear. Good taste in bags!

I feel very curious about this lesson. My mind is open and receptive.



My mobile phone alarm goes off. I am completely ready for this school year! YEEHAW! For years I struggled to sell my programme to schools until Miss Jones, the Head of this highschool, responded very enthusiastically and found a way for me to do this class.

'We'll call it Expressive Thinking, Holly' she said on the phone and I noticed how her enthusiasm started bubbling over the phone. 'I can include this in classes such as drama. As long as you don't mind teaching the pupils to speak civilised and instil poetry in your lessons.'

Expressive Thinking is indeed a part of expressive behaviour. Talking and thinking actually belong to the same family: communication and expressing yourself.

Yesterday, I had put the clothes which I want to wear on my first school day ready, so I wouldn't have to bother my brain over it this morning. It would be quite ridiculous if I'd gone out the door with two different shoes on, just from being nervous.

My bag is ready with my schedule for today in it, along with pens and a notepad, as you never know what things might have to be written down urgently, before my forgetfulness takes over.

Once you're past forty, it seems like your brain rearranges itself and other things take the lead. Not only do you suddenly discover wrinkles and age spots, but your memory seems to diminish with every shower you take, as if you wash away particles of it. Since not washing is not an option ... the notebook!

The advantage of a bad memory is that you never lie. People who lie must remember everything they say, and that would be far too tiring for me. Writing down lies in a notepad is not an option either, because it can be used as evidence for those who want to find out which lies I've told. So - no lying! That is still the best solution for a good reputation. Once you are caught in a lie, nobody believes you anymore and no one will ever trust you again with important or intimate subjects. Honesty works well for me.

Eight o'clock. I arrive at school and head to the staff room. I open the door and an abrupt silence fills the room. Not an awkward silence but just a waiting silence that you experience like when everyone is waiting for a wedding speech. As if they think 'now we're going to hear it, she will tap on her glass and raise her voice'.

I'm the new teacher. It seems that no one knows how to behave towards me. Understandable, because I'm not the new French or Geography teacher, no, I'm the new freelance teacher of this new class that the Head so excitingly talks about. No one here even dares to ask what my profession is, afraid to get an answer they may not fully understand, or maybe not know how to behave towards me. I can tell them what I want, I think to myself, and that thought gives me so many chuckles that I'm smiling.

Oh God, now they are going to think I am a bit simple because I'm laughing for no reason. That thought makes me want to laugh even harder. They'll think Miss Jones has found the village idiot .

Despite the fact that you always immediately recognise a teacher when you're on holiday or when you sit on a terrace with a coffee, it seems like this school has got a very good mix of teachers. There are teachers who I'd never would recognise as being teachers. I would hire the man in the corner when I need a plumber, the man who jumped aside

when I opened the door reminds me more of a tanned tennis coach at some tropical holiday resort. Not my type of resort, but for many people the ultimate dream of rest after a stressful year at work.

After about eleven seconds - try to count to eleven, it takes a very long time when all eyes are on you - a man FINALLY approaches me, reaching for my hand. I reply to this gesture by putting my hand into his as he introduces himself as Edward Harper, History teacher of the fourth, fifth and sixth year.

'You must be Miss Woods who will be the third year's trust teacher' he says kindly. I nod and want to answer, but he adds: 'The students at this school are good kids. We don't have the same problems like they encounter in other schools,' and he winks at me.

'What problems do you mean?' I ask, with a look that hopefully appears to be interested.

'Well: drugs, weapons, aggression, things like that' he says whilst he rolls his eyes upwards. 'Some other schools have got a lot of problems with some of these issues, but because we are not in the middle of the city, we have got a lot of students from rural areas. Not that they are intellectually impaired compared to urban children, but they are, let me say, nicer.'

Hmm, I am not really sure about this - really good-looking - teacher. Is he just mocking these children or is he really happy that this is as good as a crime free school? It would fit into the policy that the Head spoke about, after reading my lesson programme, when she clapped her hands and declared that her school was going to be the first stress-free school in the country because of my contribution!

No pressure on my shoulders then ...

And so, I find myself a little later in the presence of Miss Jones, the Head, in a class with ... counting ... nineteen

students, of which ten are girls and nine are boys. A lovely mixture.

This is the moment I've been dreaming of for years. This is my dream, and here I am, now, ready to jump out of the box whilst stretching my arms in the air, shouting 'SURPRISE'.

Miss. Jones introduces me as the teacher of this class, and as the teacher of Expressive Thinking.

All the students look puzzled.

The Head seems to read the faces and replies: 'Expressive Thinking is a part of the drawing / music / drama curriculum. I would like to explain it to you but I am convinced that Miss Woods is more than capable of that. I trust that you will all treat her correctly and will be cooperative in the classroom.'

Then she turns around, leaves the classroom, and just leaves me with 'my class'.

I clear my throat and say, 'Good morning students, I will start by introducing myself. My name is Holly Woods. I'm a personal coach by profession. Because it has always been my calling to help people to become happy, and because of this I am very excited to do this in a school.'

'Why Miss?' a girl in the back of the classroom asks interestedly. All the other students look back at me, waiting for my reply.

'Well, because now I can work simultaneously with nineteen people. You see, if I practice my programme with one person and I give that person tips and tricks on how to be happy and to continue living a happy life, then I help just one person. Which is fantastic. However, if I give tips and tricks to nineteen people simultaneously in the same time period, I multiply the results times nineteen and then I help nineteen people in a single blow.

'The finest challenge for me is that I can give these - I quote with my fingers - 'lessons' to nice young people your age'... whilst I look around the classroom, without skipping a single student.

'Why Miss?' a student in the front row asks.

'Well,' I continue with my enthusiastic introduction whilst I nod at him, 'there are so many things that take place for the first time around you age, things about which you might have questions. Let's say your first sexual experience: whether it's kissing or whether it's the whole sexual act, whether it is about feelings about the other - or perhaps the same - sex (I make a mental note of a boy, blushing), or questions about becoming an adult, the determination of having a unique character, and growing into a mature person who is happy enough with himself to make it in life.'

Sounds of agreement like 'hmm' and 'yep' and 'let's do this' sound throughout the classroom.

I'm enjoying this moment.

I enjoy this moment so much that my face radiates brighter than the sun and the students show the same enthusiasm. I never dreamed that a whole class of this age group would be ready for this kind of topic, especially since it's exactly this age that they'll be able to apply this positive experience to the rest of their lives.

Look at her glowing, our Holly, she's on a rollercoaster!

What you have to know about me is that I have innocent voices in my head. You know, the kind of voices that everyone has. One wants to move forward, the other loves certainty and wants to stay put. Most of the time they are quite funny, although they usually have the wrong timing.

'I hope I will be able to give my lessons to other classes one day, can you imagine what a domino effect this will have?'

I feel my face go red out of excitement and hear myself proclaim my calling, and when I come back from my ascending cloud, I see thirty eight eyes staring at me, wide open with anticipation.

'What kind of things will we be learning Miss?' a girl asks.

'Basically I'm going to provide you all with different ways to be happy and to reduce stress without needing help from

someone else. Many people think they will be happy when they have lots of money or a big house, or a well paid job, or lots of children ... while these things never made anyone a hundred percent happy. Material things make us happy, temporarily at best, but never permanently. Happiness comes from within yourself, not from external things.

'Miss, you say that children can't make you happy, but children don't belong to the material world, do they?'
'That's right,' I reply, 'but what if you live in the thought that you can only be happy when you have a child, you give birth and you have a child. Then you're lucky in that aspect of your life, but you're much more than just a Mum. You're also daughter, a niece, a partner, a neighbour, a client, a colleague, a friend, and much more. Imagine then that you are temporarily unhappy in your Mummy role because your child turns out to be a cry baby and you haven't slept in five nights. If at that moment you are convinced that you are only a Mummy, then there is a probability that your world - if your world is limited to being a Mummy - collapses. However, if you realise at that moment that there are other roles in your life, you can go and get energy in a different role, in order to keep yourself - to your best of your ability - in the role of Mummy.'

It is quiet in the classroom. I can hear cogs turning in their brains. Some cogs have come to a standstill to take in everything that's just been said.

Mouths are open as if they think that more oxygen can be inhaled like this. Eyes slightly further apart, just opened. Not one student is looking at another student, everyone is engaged one hundred percent in incorporating this new fact into their lives. From today these teenagers are pupils, children, grandchildren, nieces or nephews, neighbours children, customers ... All pupils are in their own bubble - in slow motion - becoming their new selves.

YES!

You know, when it comes to teenagers, it is necessary not to rush the giving of critical information which will be very useful in their lives. Too often they get overwhelmed with new external impressions and feelings, that this type of information has got to be absorbed very slowly to be able to seep into their main mechanism, so it can occupy a solid place in their brain to help all subsequent decisions in their lives with this wisdom.

Our brain has got several subdivisions. One of the most important parts is the one where all the information is saved that will help us in difficult periods of life. It's a bit like an encyclopedia, but filled with tools. This data is open to change. Of course.

When you're a child and you just fell on the ground and your knee is bleeding, you cry because you see red fluid pouring out of your knee. That knee is, as far as you know, broken. As a child, you don't put a length of time on this knee being broken. Your knee will not be broken for two days or two weeks, no, your knee is broken now. As a child, NOW is your life. Not tomorrow or next week, but now.

As you get older you will learn that the bleeding will stop after proper care, and there will be nothing more than a scab after a few days, and finally, when that scab falls off, the injury will be healed. This childhood information is supplemented by experience to be as complete as possible for future experiences.

When we can insert tools for the pains of life in this part of the brain, then we have a more realistic picture of what happens to us and we put things in perspective.

Not minimise - but to put in perspective.



'Jesus, what a woman!' Finn echoes through the hallways. 'Finally we get lessons in life, instead of about places and facts that occurred on dates when the animals still spoke, or numbers we will never repeat, or endlessly boring prepositions which I will never learn. No, this is real life darlings, a real life we will lead one day!'

At that time the French teacher, Mrs Bordeaux passes, raising her eyebrows at hearing this theatrical performance.

'Finn, please, a little more seriousness and less playfulness would suit you as well,' she says with her nose in the air.

Finn rolls his eyes whilst she passes by him.

Mrs Bordeaux continues, without looking back, but with a playful tone, 'I saw that!' Finn's eyes grow as big as saucers, and he quietly turns to continue his journey to the next lesson.

'Leon, don't laugh!' he whispers smiling.



The first lesson of Expressive Thinking is finished, and I look around the classroom, which is now abandoned, with a feeling of satisfaction. The children went out to go to their next lesson, and I have a free hour. A deserved free, because giving and teaching lessons in happiness requires a lot of energy from a person. It's not only my job to work out a whole programme, but the students in my class have got a lot of time to insert their own ideas and thoughts, which gives me the challenge of not letting these conversations wander too much.

In my mind I see myself catching thought clouds with a lasso.

My imagination goes crazy again. This happens often, it keeps me sane. That's what I say anyway, but I get along with myself, so I'm the only one who has to agree with that. In addition, it doesn't play tricks on me because I never say those things out loud. Not until now anyway.

I'm just musing about all the things I can teach here, and also about the blushing boy who might be struggling with his sexuality, when the door opens with a jerk.

'How was it, Holly?' the Head asks, entering my class with a happy laugh.

'Ooh what a blissful class! From the first moment it clicked between the students and me, and with all of them, really. I feel like I'm in seventh heaven, I can barely contain myself until the next lesson starts! If I can help these students to rethink about themselves and life, can you imagine what kind of an impact this will have? This whole school, all these children ...'

'Six hundred and eighty-seven to be precise' she interrupts me laughing. 'and call me Ellen, please.'

'Exactly, Ellen, all six hundred and eighty-seven children to teach in finding peace, happiness and self love ... can you imagine what that could mean for our entire society? There would be so many fewer people without a depression or a burnout because they have been given the tools to prevent it. No more prolonged stress, because everyone will know how to put stress into perspective and to minimise it!'

Ellen is laughing out loud. She has a catchy roaring laugh, I bet my just-taught students can hear her all the way to the biology classroom. When she smiles she throws her head and neck back so her bead necklace is stuck between her neck and upper back.

'I love your enthusiasm,' she says, beaming. 'If all the teachers would have half your enthusiasm, students would love to come to school! I can't complain, the teachers at our school are actually all fine people, with a very small percentage an exception to that statement. Maybe you can change this' she winks.

'No problem,' I reply back eagerly.

Yep, life is beautiful. I've always known that.



On my way home I see Emma. Since the kiss, and especially by the sudden abrupt end because her father called her, we haven't exchanged one word.

What do I say? I get no word, no gaze. Nothing. It feels so empty. A nod would already satisfy me, because then I'd get confirmation that we are in the same camp. The camp of "us".

I hasten my pace until I walk beside her. Fortunately there is no one else, so it's just the two of us.

'Hi Emma, how are you?' I ask politely.

I see her blush, but she does not turn her head.

'Did I do something wrong?' I ask.

How can she not answer?

That kiss was so good.

Oops! That kiss was good for me ... but maybe not for her?

Maybe she thinks I'm the worst kisser ever?

Maybe I'm not the first guy she kissed?

My thoughts are interrupted by her answer.

'No silly boy next door, it's just getting used to it.' she says.

I'm trying to think, unsuccessfully in the circumstances.

Think you idiot, what is the right answer in this case? I don't even know if she means this positively or negatively. I don't know if she thinks our kiss was a single event or maybe she doesn't know how to behave ...

I pick up all my courage and ask, 'What do you mean?'

'Well, we kissed ... and now ...? Are we a couple or have we only kissed?' she asks.

She has a point. Are we ready to be a couple?

'Do you think we're a good match?' I finally ask.

'Yes,' she whispers.

I take her hand in mine and entwine my fingers in hers and we walk our way home.
We don't need a French kiss goodbye at the door. A kiss on the cheek is good enough.
We are definitely a couple.
We know that.
There's still time enough to kiss. Now we have the certainty of each other, and that's the most important thing.
My body is gradually becoming mature, I feel it in many places.
My role of neighbour has turned into a dual role of neighbour and lover, and that feels just fine to me.

'You've got a smile on your face !' Mum says. I blush while she strokes my head as if I am still a little boy. She thinks I'm probably still small, but I've kissed. Really kissed, not like little kids kissing Granny and Granddad. Really, not on the mouth but in the mouth. Kissed with tongues. I am one of the adults now. I own that piece of life experience and that makes me invincible at the moment. I am very happy because Emma also thinks we are a good match. Not just 'to be', but 'to be from now on'.



The following Wednesday morning, half-past eight: Lesson number two. I enter the classroom and everyone is sitting at their desk, all full of attention. I feel so important to these nineteen teenagers! I don't have to be arrogant to notice that they like me, but it's true. I glow from top to toe!

'Miss, what can we actually expect from this class Thinking Expressive?' Finn asks. 'You've made us enthusiastic but we don't even know what for.' I laugh out loud at this fair comment and sit down on the corner of my desk.

My audience listens. There is a comforting silence in the room. In my mind I take the microphone from its stand and start singing YOU MAKE ME FEEL LIKE A NATURAL WOMAN.

'Well: at the end of the day everyone wants the same in life: to be happy and to be healthy. And when we are that, all other factors will automatically fall into place. Now these two goals are very different, knowing that we don't have 100% control of our health.'

I get a silent permission to continue speaking.

'Let me give you an example: I once knew a man who had never been married. He was 52 and sold his home to live a little further down the street with his 73 year old aunt. The man had never smoked in his life. Because he had always lived alone he never really had been confronted with smoke and nicotine. The aunt on the other hand, was a chain smoker. She lit the second cigarette with the stub of the first. She even got up in the middle of the night to smoke.

'Yuk' sounds resonate in the classroom.

'They went together to the clinic for a preventive checkup of their heart and lungs, and guess what? The man's lungs were as black as soot, and the aunts' lungs were as good as clean. In terms of health, there are many exceptions to the rule, and no matter how much research is done to get the best medication against existing chronic diseases, there will always be the emergence of new diseases, because even diseases evolve.

A girl in the back of the class with the wonderful name of Eleanor raises her hand and says: 'My Mum passed away three years ago. She went to the dentist to renew a filling. The dentist numbed her jaw and she had an allergic reaction to the product he used. I didn't see her alive again. She was an exception to the rule.' Throughout the whole class the sound 'poor you's' and 'ooh's'. I go to her and put my arm around her. 'I'm sorry to hear that, Eleanor' I say very sincerely. No teenager should lose a parent.

I can't help but change the subject, because I don't want Eleanor to remain in this state of mind, reliving her trauma.

'So students,' I say, 'every time we look at a subject that has got to sink deep into your brains, I will insert sinking time.'

Nineteen puzzled teenage looks ... I smile.

'I will always announce it, and then you may sit silently, to let sink in all that has been said. That is vital. I don't want to overload you with information at a pace that no one even remembers, because then I don't do my job well.'

'So how are we supposed to sit Miss?' Leon asks mischievously.

'Make it easy on yourself, in a pose that feels good for you,' I reply, laughing. 'It doesn't matter how you sit, but it does matter how you think. That sinking time is needed, because I don't want you to repeat everything I say, but to form your own opinion. The last thing I want is for you to copy my

statements. The world needs original thinkers, not clones of the first thinker.

'May we have a sinking time about this?' Ann asks. 'Of course,' I reply, 'and I sit down at my desk, taking my notebook and drawing a scratchy heart on the first page.'

Look at them sitting here, my first nineteen students. The first nineteen teenagers which are much less likely to have a depression or a burnout after following my life package information. MY pupils. Some are sitting with their heads in their hands, others with a fist under their chins, some hang in their chairs ... it's not for me to tell them what the right pose for thinking is. No one is allowed to tell me how to think. So I won't tell anyone else how to sit.

I'm not even going to begin to tell my class how I think. Sometimes sitting, lying down, lying upside down, lying on my side, sitting backwards in my chair, whilst eating, drinking, smiling, weeping ... Every moment has a different way of expression. There is no rule, just a moment. I look at them and fight the tears of emotion and gratitude.



I hear tapping against my bedroom window, just at the same moment that Mum calls me down for dinner. I look out my window and see Henry signaling me to come outside. With excessive gestures I motion with my lips "*we are going to eat*" whilst putting an imaginative spoon to my mouth. With the same excessive gestures he taps his watch whilst asking "*how long?*", his shoulders and his hands open like a priest about to talk to God. I open and close my fists twice at him. Twenty minutes.

During the meal Mum asks me, 'Are you and Emma an item?' Dad glances over his glasses amused but stays quiet. He is glad that this kind of question is asked by his wife and all he has to do is listen. I pretend I don't notice his smile. Lying is no option because they probably already talked to the neighbours, so I reply 'Yes', a little shy. Mum shows me a warm smile only Mums can do.

My Mum is very sweet. I am an only child and I have to admit that I have got everything my heart desires, but I'm not spoiled. No is no, both to my Mum and my Dad. 'Can I go outside with Henry after dinner?' I ask. 'He was just at the door when you called to say the food was ready.' 'I didn't hear anything' Mum replies. 'No, Henry always throws little pebbles at my window when he needs me' I reply. Dad looks up at me and says 'He better not break the window or I will throw a pebble at him!' I look at him, only to notice he is smiling mischievously. Sometimes he thinks he's so funny! Humour is clearly different when you're forty or a teenager!

Eighteen minutes after my twenty minute mark I'm outside. Henry is waiting on the wall of our front yard. 'Have you got a minute?' he asks.