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WHAT'S ON YOUR CAREER HORIZON?

LIKE MANY PEOPLE, I FELL INTO A JOB, DECIDED IT WOULD DO NICELY AND, 15 YEARS LATER, I'M STILL DOING THE SAME THING. Recently, my dissatisfaction with journalism has led me to dabble in copywriting, and writing fiction – neither with any great conviction. I can't work out my dream job – but I can't carry on like this either – so I've booked into a career retreat called The Big Stretch, in Asturias, northern Spain, that promises to help me rekindle my 'passions, purpose and hopes'.

DAY ONE

At the arrivals lounge in Spain, I meet my fellow 'Big Stretchers'. It's a bit awkward – after all, no one's here for a holiday; everyone has 'issues'. What's more, as the retreat focuses on group sessions, we'll be sharing our problems. After a drive in virtual silence, we arrive at La Montaña Mágica, a hotel perched in splendid isolation, surrounded by rolling countryside. The hee-haw of a donkey in the field below

reverberates through the valley. Instinctively, I feel the simplicity of life up here is just what my tangled brain needs.

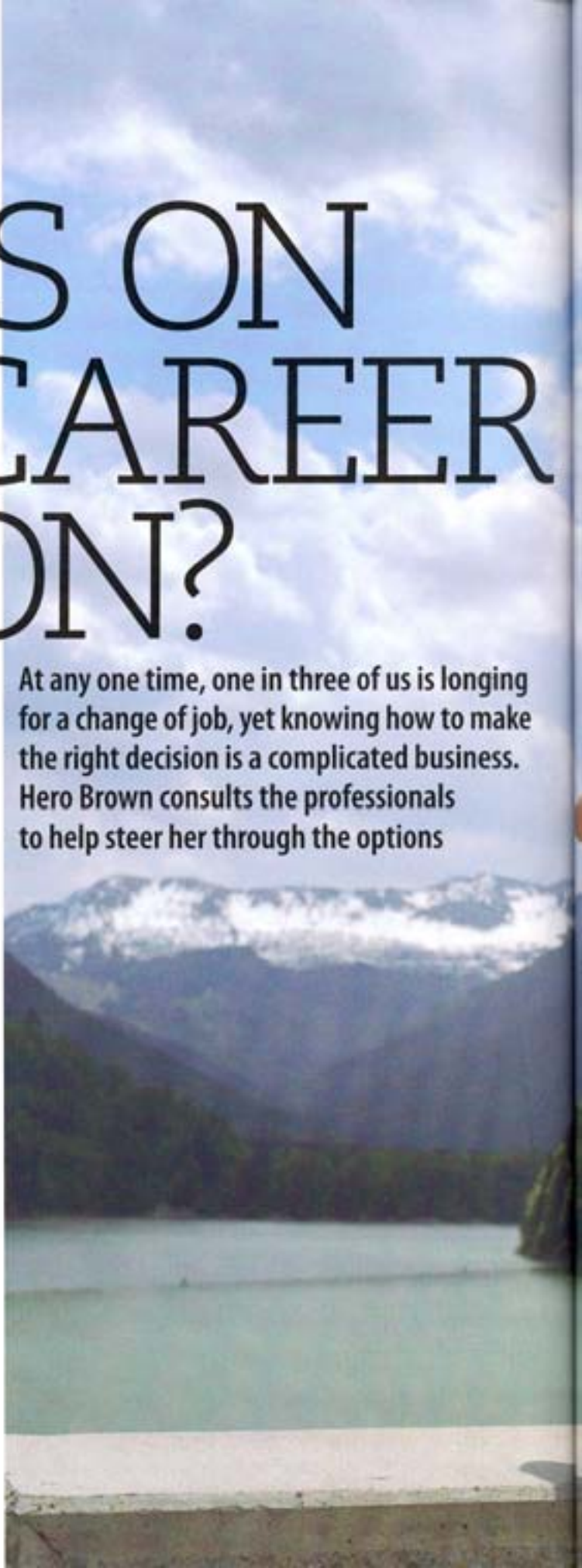
Our coaches, Rosie and Dimple, explain how the week will progress. We're told to expect strong emotions – crying is not uncommon. We are asked to be supportive of other group members and to be honest with ourselves. I think this week will be hard work.

DAY TWO

Notepads in hand, we take it in turns to explain why we've signed up for this career retreat. Michael, 47, a CEO, is desperate for a better work/life balance; Ines, 57, an advertising strategist, feels life is passing her by; Stuart, 34, a designer who's just been made redundant, wants to work out what to do next; and Sarah, 45, a high-flyer in a marketing firm, feels her career is overtaking her life.

We start work. Today we're going to discover our core values – apparently this is key to our wellbeing. We're asked to recall a time when we were happy and work out

At any one time, one in three of us is longing for a change of job, yet knowing how to make the right decision is a complicated business. Hero Brown consults the professionals to help steer her through the options





what made us so. Then we do the exercise in reverse, reflecting on a time when we were upset. As everyone recounts their good and bad times, I realise I'm the only one who has used scenarios from my home life rather than work. Suddenly, I feel vulnerable. I've worked out my core values - spontaneity, compassion and intimacy - but does my career really need an overhaul?

I'm relieved when the morning session ends and we go hiking in the mountains. It is all part of the plan: research shows that exercise and the distraction of nature help to free the mind, allowing the subconscious to resolve issues and untangle difficult thoughts.

DAY THREE

This morning we're focusing on our dream scenario. My perfect life would be this: I'd get commissioned for four amazing travel stories a year, I'd learn Spanish, be financially secure and, most importantly, I'd write a novel. I'm surprised at my list because writing a book feels unfeasible right now.

I'm not the only one whose dreams come as a shock: Stuart (redundant designer) decides he wants to open a restaurant, and Ines (ad woman) is shocked to find she's still not over the loss of her husband, who died 11 years ago.

The afternoon brings a three-hour hike through the dramatic, beautiful Cares gorge. Striding out, my dream life starts to feel strangely, intoxicatingly possible.

DAY FOUR

One-to-one session today. Coach Rosie has an uncanny ability to probe aspects of my life and personality I'd rather not explore. Before long, we're into the nitty-gritty: why do I dismiss any fiction that I ▶

◀ write? Why don't I give myself the space to be creative? The answers are personal, ugly: I fear failure deeply, I hate the possibility that I'm just 'ordinary' at writing, and I feel massively guilty about the indulgence of attempting a novel. We agree that I must visualise myself as a creative writer and not be deflected by guilt and self-criticism.

DAY FIVE

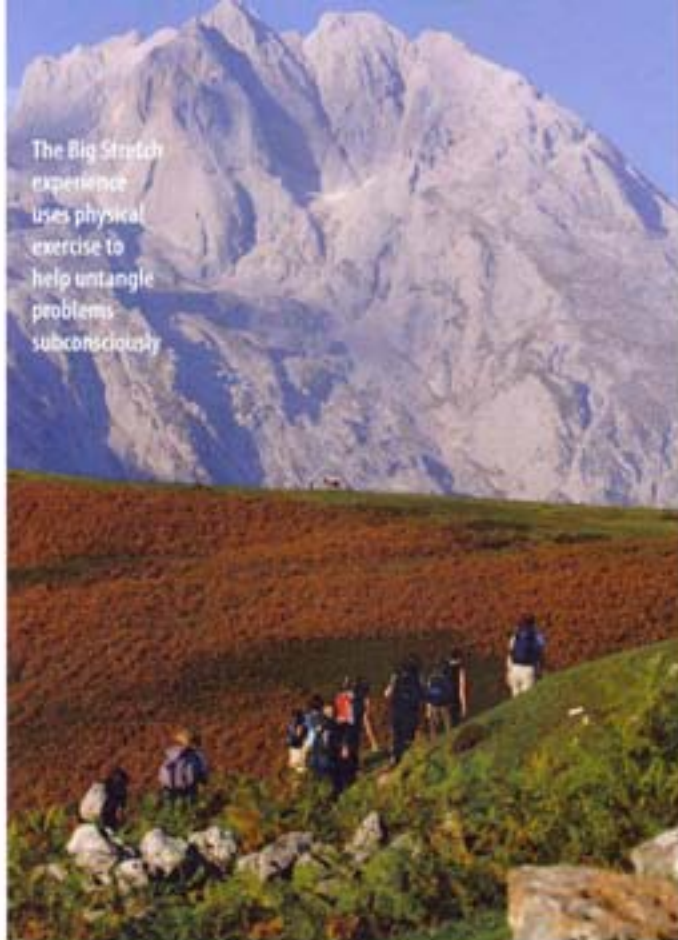
In our morning session, Michael (the stressed CEO) and I gamely attempt to solve each other's biggest how-to's. When it comes to my keeping the vision of myself as a creative writer, he suggests I start *calling myself a writer* – not a journalist – and perhaps give up one of my regular columns to allow more time to work on my fiction. They're helpful suggestions, but I feel slightly uncomfortable. Maybe I don't want to be a novelist after all...

DAY SIX

We have to read out our mission statements – a summary of what we want and how we're going to achieve it. I say mine with little conviction, so Rosie asks me to say it again with more belief. I can't. I won't! I hate expressing something on demand, and the mantra-like expression of the words jars with me. I'm tense and upset, and everyone senses it.

Later, we sketch a picture of our 'journey' – our experiences before, during and after this week. I feel totally uninspired until I see Ines. All week, she has been talking about wanting her life to be like eating a mango: juicy, exotic, fun. 'Mango life' has become a bit of a jokey group-buzzword, but I really like the analogy. I draw the fruit, and scrawl 'Mango! Mango!' all over it. It's silly, but it makes me realise how

The Big Stretch experience uses physical exercise to help untangle problems subconsciously



important writing is to me.

Afterwards, we are asked to have conversations as if we are the person we want to be. 'Hi, I'm Hero, I'm on my third novel,' I find myself saying. 'You haven't read it? Maybe you've seen the film adaptation...' It all gets a bit silly, but the exercise works its magic. Later on, we sketch out practical timelines for the changes we want. Mine suddenly looks manageable.

DAY SEVEN

The morning starts badly. Every time I talk about being a novelist, I feel like a fraud. Then it hits me: I'm putting too much pressure on myself. Maybe instead of shouting about being a 'novelist' (who hasn't written a word yet), I could begin writing creatively – whatever form that takes. Pathetically small change. I know, but it makes a massive difference to my focus. Now my new career feels achievable. I beam at everyone.

FINAL DAY

I'm amazed at how this week has changed me. I feel confident about how to make real changes to my life. My husband, Paul, and Finn, my little boy, meet me at the airport in London – it's fantastic to be back with them. That evening, over a glass of wine, I nervously tell Paul that I want to write fiction – and that I'll need to give up some freelance regulars to do it. His reaction is lovely: 'You'll be great at it. Give up work altogether if you want.'

EPILOGUE

My first week at home. I get online and request the prospectus of a writing course. Spontaneously take the day off for Paul's birthday. Quit my column. Eat mango. ■ *The Big Stretch costs £2,350 for one week, including full board. Visit www.thebigstretch.com or call 0845-430 8621 for further information.*

HOW TO CHANGE YOUR CAREER

Six positive steps that you can take now to get the life you want

1 Plan a day away from home and work, and head to a relaxing environment. Take a notepad and a friend who also wants to change his or her life – someone you can be honest with.

2 Think about what you want from your career. Would you be happy if you worked flexibly, were more appreciated? Look at your problems positively: think, 'How can I... (feel more fulfilled, work part-time)?' rather than, 'I wish...' Make a list of ways to improve your situation.

3 Work out what is in the way of you getting your dream job. Is it confidence, experience? With your friend, work out the biggest barrier and pose it as a question – e.g., 'How do I find the confidence to set up my own business?' When you've worked out your question, do something active for a few hours so your mind can work subconsciously.

4 Come back to your big 'How do I...?' Focus on each other's question, brainstorming practical ideas. Be specific: e.g., 'contact a small business advisor', 'take a course', etc.

5 Now that you have a list of practical ideas, make a timeline. Work out three things you can do in the next 24 hours to kick-start your new career.

6 Email someone with your commitment, so that it becomes real. Ask someone you trust to support you in your new venture, and do it.