

Chapter 6

Jet Lag

In my lost hours, my finest hours!

I'm training in an English martial art, very hard to master for a Frenchwoman... being polite: I'm sorry, sorry, sorry and sorry again. Not very common among frogs! Head under the guillotine, the Gaul never admits he's wrong. A mistake is a weakness. An apology, a surrender. Better to lie with arrogance than die of shame! A matter of honour! The *Frog* only negotiates from a position of strength and never apologises. Too risky for his ego.

Me, on the other hand, I've never had a problem apologising.

I learnt very early that, to dodge the flak from those who give a dog a bad name and hang him, I had, *at the very least*, to apologise for things I wasn't responsible for, and incidentally for who I was, because apparently, being myself wouldn't suit everyone. Logical, everyone is unique, but some people seem unaware of it, so I've been practising apologising for years:

— I apologise for being a victim of my fears, otherwise I wouldn't be writing this book. Because apparently, I'm one of the few people interested in what hides in the unconscious. Doesn't pay enough, so they say. No point.

— I apologise for watching the hummingbirds from my hammock, while others are working, well, pretending to, and still nobody pays me for mine!

— I apologise for listening to children laughing at the seaside, instead of *TeleKata 24/24*. Between smiling and sulking, I've made my choice!

— I apologise for writing numbers in figures, because it's easier to read in every language, a dyslexic's trick!

— I apologise for not having had children, because a scalpel fanatic took out my ovaries, without asking my opinion. The very same one who sleeps with a clear conscience, and couldn't care less about my premature ageing, caused by the hormonal chaos she set off. Yes, I admit it, I'm a tad miffed.

The doctor — What have we got today?

The nurse — Hysterectomy.

The doctor — We open up, I'll take the ovaries out too, off we go! She won't notice anyway, she's asleep. Neither will the health insurance, for that matter, that way I can bill double.

The nurse — We need to write down a good reason for that, doctor.

The doctor — Put *as a precaution*, that always goes through, and it's not wrong, a precaution for my pension!

— I apologise for not being in a couple, because I took the time to write a book to get over the last one.

— I apologise for having voluptuous curves, very fashionable in the 50s.

— I apologise for being tall in the South, because the men only come up to my armpits.

— I apologise for being overqualified, because in France, I'm always asked to justify my skills without ever being paid for them, the cheek of it!

— And of course, I apologise for apologising for being so humble, it balances things out!

— But above all, more than anything, and most of all, I apologise for not being on time! Because *there is great art in my lateness*, without my working at it much.

Which has absolutely nothing to do with my parents, poor things! Because in my family, being on time is sacred! Engraved in our DNA.

Mum has the time in her head, with built-in alarms, a clock projected on the ceiling, winter time, summer time. She's got every option. She's infallible, unbeatable. Nothing can happen to her. Everything runs like clockwork, she's the conductor of the time zones. Her secret? Respect for timetables! My mother's greatest stress isn't jumping off a train, or a boat, no, that she can handle! It's not knowing what time it is!

It's hereditary. She gets it from my grandfather, half Alsatian, half Swiss. Punctuality is the politeness of kings, and our family silver, handed down from generation to generation, the universal law that governs life. Everything revolves around solar time. Impossible to live outside temporal gravity. Without a timed atmosphere, everything goes to pot.

The secret of her power? An enormous heart! She adores people. Has everyone round to hers, takes care of everything and everyone, protects her family and loved ones, like a lioness with her cubs. She lives by heroic values: fights for what matters, family, work, balance, adventure, excellence and surpassing yourself.

A perfectionist, she does everything with talent. A touch controlling, she reassures and protects. Her tiller for holding course? Always the happy medium! Critical mind and down-to-earth common sense, humour and self-mockery, love and control.

Before I was born, Mum went through 9 months of pregnancy, all shipshape! I was so calm she didn't have a single contraction. And then *BOOM!* 10 days late! For the first and last time in her life!

The doctor still remembers that beautiful brunette with green eyes and a thunderbolt gaze, a dazzling smile, perfect proportions, always impeccable, even after a marathon... A woman who superbly ignores anyone telling her how to behave, and charges into action with the energy of ten men. And her voice! A megaphone that drowns everyone out. A modern Athena who turns his surgery into an arena the moment she walks in. Impossible to forget her! Or to resist her charm.

Mum — 10 days late, Doctor! Do you realise! I've done everything you told me... Nothing! So I jumped off tables to bring on the labour... Nothing! This can't go on, Doctor! It can't go on any longer! If you don't step in right now, I'll deal with it myself! So do something, but above all, do it fast!

With the delay she's built up, this little one, she'll never be on time! It's unacceptable, Doctor! Because of your negligence, I'll have to be on her back all the time to remind her of the time! Thank goodness I've got the time in my head to make up for her lateness! And to think I thought France was a great country! Run by incompetents, more like!

So, to shut her up, they put her under. A dose fit for a horse, to avoid any risk. They needed silence to stay focused, without her stepping in to supervise the operation.

So I was born by caesarean, 10 days overdue. I was nice and warm, quietly in my hammock watching the hummingbirds, when all of a sudden... two giant gloves pulled me out of my dream. And then... nothing! An icy cold. An existential void. I had the most almighty panic attack! *Apocalypse Now*, only worse. A real nightmare! Imagine, Mum slept for 24 hours.

Me — Oi, hey! Mum? Dad? Where are you?

I was all alone in the dark, screaming with fear. Shrill, swelling cries brushed past me without ever touching me. I thought they were coming from outside, they were mine, actually! I scared myself witless all on my own! I screamed so much I had nightmares about it until I was 7. I wouldn't wish it on anyone!

Me — Oi, hey! Is anyone there? I'm scared!

But the trainee nurse wasn't in the mood... All because her bloke had just dumped her and she couldn't stand hearing me scream any more! My shrill cries put an end to her vocation as a childminder.

The nurse — This is all your fault! You should have been born on time, instead of lazing about in bliss!

Me —

Is anyone else there?

But I wasn't fooled... That trainee had NOTHING to do with the maternal instinct of MY OWN DARLING MUMMY! But that's how that silly cow made me believe, when I was barely 3 hours old, that my parents had abandoned me because of me. She set off my phobia of time and gave me a lifetime of guilt.

Luckily, MY PARENTS ARE NOT THAT KIND! They had already lost their country, no way were they going to abandon their daughter, never!

But since the nurse couldn't find the decoder to shut me up, she stuck a bottle in my beak, with baby food meant for a 12-week-old... And then people wonder how sugar addictions and lactose intolerances are born! And why we throw ourselves at chocolate, for fear of missing out on affection? Just out of fear of abandonment. Totally irrational? Go and tell that to the newborn!

Except my mother IS A WARRIOR! Sugar doesn't stand a chance. My lateness was already a disaster, but getting fat was completely out of the question! No way were her darling daughters going to let themselves go to such excesses. I gave her a lot of trouble, but I stayed within acceptable proportions.

And if, by chance, the scales tipped too far, the air-raid sirens went off! Best not to go there! Her loudspeaker drilled into my eardrums until I was back within the norm. Ever since she assumed a youthful sweetheart had left her for a slimmer girl, she decided to keep her figure for good, and by extension to keep mine, to spare me the same disappointment.

Sport is her religion. You have to keep moving! At 85, she walks every day. After radiotherapy, she climbed her two

flights of stairs every day, and did her 10 minutes of walking between two benches. Cracked hips or not, nothing doing! She recovered faster than a 20-year-old. Now she's hiking to train for the *Presqu'île du Sel* marathon. Mum is a force of nature. You have to keep up so as not to lose her. No choice, she moves with a turbo!

Anyway. The newborn's trauma threw my body clock out of whack. I've never managed to catch up.

All because of a caesarean that was supposed to help me live in peace! And a reckless trainee, who never knew anything about her misdeed! That's how a newborn tips over into *full Eeyore* mode! And creates, without meaning to, an anxious attachment style, completely invisible to the naked eye, unconscious, undetectable. The kind of thing even carbon 14 can't pick up. Apart from Sherlock Holmes, I can't see who could work it out.

But since I hadn't quite understood how to say no the first time, they pulled the same trick on me 50 years later.

In short. Sometimes I wonder why we don't leave babies in their hammock watching the hummingbirds, instead of wanting to pull them out of paradise before they're ready!

Mum, poor thing, can't understand, since it all happened behind her back, entirely of her own free will. My two parents share the same view: rely only on yourself and on each other, it's safer.

Mum thought she understood that her father, whom she admired, might have had a crush on her aunt. We'll never know, the case was closed with no further action. She defended her mother tooth and nail, and never again trusted anyone to protect her own. If you want something

done well, do it yourself. For his part, Dad knew everything was written, when his father died far too young, but that fate can't read a date.

So when a man, with an ego big enough to hold an entire country, said to them one day: *I have understood you*, and straight after, uprooted them, they understood all right that no one would ever decide for them again. They were part of History, and incidentally, it changed their lives, which woke up their need for control.

In this unstable world, better to be wary of appearances and rely only on yourself to be free! Since then, to reassure themselves, they control everything. You can never be too careful! That's how, out of unconditional love, you become slightly controlling. It all makes sense!

And since both my parents are *pieds-noirs*, and have been for four generations, suffice to say they redoubled their efforts to rebuild everything and protect their darling daughters! Control is their way of loving... and they love us enormously.

So, since they anticipate everything, they've never understood why, ever since I was born, I've lived in an existential jet lag. I leave when I'm supposed to arrive, I think about my appointments in the middle of the night. My synaptic connections, when it comes to timing, look like level crossings: sometimes yes, sometimes no. The stationmaster switches tracks without warning. And the staff go on strike regularly.

The Viking — You should have worked for British Rail, you'd have fitted right in!

Mum has never been able to get used to it. It was her life's mission: to set me back on time. So she did everything, did it all right, all squared away, she moved heaven and earth. And Dad always backed her up, to smooth things over.

- When are you leaving, darling?
- What time is your appointment, my love?
- Careful, the clocks are changing!
- Did you remember to set your watch?
- What time are you coming tomorrow, sweetheart?
- What time do your clients arrive?
- And when do they leave?
- Do you at least know what day it is?

- JEAN! WHAT TIME IS IT?
- Well, can't you look on your phone?
- Pfff... you can't ask him anything! He's useless!
- Hang on, I'll tell you... what time it is!

- Already! But you're not in bed yet at this hour?
- It's late, you'll be tired tomorrow!
- What time are you getting up?
- Do you want me to call you so you don't forget?
- Go on, off to bed, darling! We'll talk tomorrow!
- I love you, darling, but you're not really trying.

She doesn't know why... She's never been able to fix my trauma!

Mum is a locomotive, noise, steam and all. Even if sometimes the Libra wobbles... 10 times... once she decides, nothing stops her. Her valiant heart, full of boldness, races off fast, and charges bravely towards her destiny! She leaves before everyone else and always

arrives first! She anticipates everything, like a kitchen timer! Everything runs like clockwork. She knows everything, controls everything, ducks in a row! Otherwise, she explodes! She's a bombshell!

Dad is the anchor in the storm. Capricorn through and through: pragmatic, realistic, steady. He moves forward with precision, no smoke and mirrors, just the facts. His clear vision and dry humour land just right, at exactly the right moment! He cushions or he sends it back, like in tennis. And sometimes a *passing shot*, or a good volley. He's straight down the line, he observes, he smiles. He says what he thinks, even if people don't like it, he doesn't care. He owns it. When it comes to timing, he does things straight away, without grumbling, what's done needn't be done again. They get on wonderfully.

Faced with the great overflowing heart that no one can control, he doesn't get carried away. Steady, warm, he loves her deeply, supports her tenderly through the storm and above all, he adores winding her up. Mind you, he understands her better than anyone, he knows full well that everything can stop overnight, he's lived through it. So better to rely on yourself, and on each other to move forward, rather than on politicians: idiots, the lot of them! They chose to live, to laugh, to face up to things, especially when they're afraid. Belt and braces, as Mum says!

Two equal forces, two characters who complement each other and move forward together in the same direction. They get worked up at each other over trifles, just to keep in shape. Get on each other's nerves as much as they love each other. Bicker often, especially in front of the children, as much as they respect each other.

But they can't do without each other. Even if, sometimes, they'd quite like a bit of air, they stick together, for life, till death.

They form an alloy so solid you can no longer see the graft. A bit like those immense trees in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, which feed and shelter a whole ecosystem around them.

Dad — Renata, the doctor has told you a hundred times, Coraline has structural jet lag, a kind of time dyslexia. You've tried everything, let it go, let her live!

Mum — And you're the one saying that? Then stop calling her every day! So there! I know you, you know, with your conditioned reflex of unconditional love. The man hasn't been born who could stop you calling YOUR darling daughters before you go to bed! It reassures you!

Dad — So what? We've called them every evening since they were born, we're not going to unsettle them! Let's not overdo it! You don't change good habits!

Mum — He and I are the same. When he forgets, I remind him, to make him feel guilty. So there!

Dad — We understand each other. For 60 years, that's always how we've worked. We're alarms for each other.

Mum — Anger wakes us up, keeps us alive, thanks to it, we're always on alert!

Dad — It's the safest alarm system in the world. The girls don't understand. But we patented it on the quiet, without telling them.

Mum — Jean takes care of everything, I supervise. It used to be the other way round, but since retirement, I've delegated.

Dad — Yes, she's Head of Quality Control!

Mum — By the way, Jean, have you got the time?

Dad — It's time to go.

Mum — Right, we have to go, darling, in 15 minutes it's the 8 pm news. What time are you waking up? Shall we see each other tomorrow? Will you call me first to confirm? Bye, darling! We love you! We'll call you when we get there!

Dad — Goodnight, darling! Just send us a little text when you go to bed? That way we'll know you're all right!

Mum has the time in her head. So she anticipates, she saves time. Me, it seems I've got my head in the clouds, so I give time time... In my lost hours, my finest hours! Each to their own.

The journalist — After the break¹, the locomotive and the anchor join us in the studio, with your sister in the carriage!

The author — And the Viking will be sitting between them? Good luck, this should be fun!

The Viking — A Viking never backs down. It's a matter of honour!

¹ [Reader challenge: Call out what annoys you in the form of an apology.](#)



The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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