

Chapter 16

The Chestnut-Stuffed Turkey

Michel Audiard — *Monsieur Gangster*¹

Blunders are like taxes: sooner or later, you always pay up.

There's Christmas in fairy tales, New Year's Day well lubricated... and the chestnut turkey, well and truly stuffed!

¹ Monsieur Gangster (Les Tontons flingueurs), dialogue by Michel Audiard (YouTube).

After a week of conflict, the Viking waves the white flag. Truce... He hasn't grumbled for fifteen minutes. A record!

Him — It's New Year's Day! Let's bury the hatchet, I'm taking you out to dinner!

Me — No thanks, I'm sleepy and I haven't been paid yet.

Him — Don't worry, it's on me, so we can unwind a bit.

Me — No, I'm shattered. All I dream of is my bed.

Him — Come on! A change of scene and a party will do us good!

A quarter of an hour later... out of arguments

Me — You think? Maybe you're right... what about the village?

Him — No, I don't like driving home late on black ice.

Me — Why not a restaurant in the resort?

Him — Not that either, I've got a better idea! What about the one right next door? That way we can drink and walk home.

Me — Oh no, I work there, that won't relax me one bit! My boss is throwing a dinner for the whole resort. He's under pressure. It's THE night of the season!

Him — Yes! It's the best option! There, I've booked, now come here! *kiss kiss*

The Viking invites himself along, with his one-metre Big Dog. Me, awkward smile, on high alert. Behind the charm, he's been wound up tighter than a G-string for a week.

I'm braced for the worst, he's looking for an excuse...
Bingo! Our table (or rather his ego) has been plonked in the middle of the aisle.

Him — That's it, I've had enough!

Me — Please don't make a scene. We're here, we're staying.

The Viking gets up noisily, staggers heavily and bellows for all he's worth:

Him — We're leaving! Are you coming with me, or is it over? Is it me or your boss?

Lovely atmosphere! There, he's done it. He's led me right up the garden path. Naturally, he picked New Year's Day. The real one, the only one, the painful one. Everyone's embarrassed, except him: he's fuming and secretly gloating. I follow him out to avoid the worst. I plan to come straight back, apologise and pay for both our meals. Except outside, it gets worse...

The betrayed emperor squawks like a turkey. The sound's too loud, I'd rather mute it. I just keep the pictures and swap the soundtrack for *Jingle Bells*, hard-rock version. The Nordic werewolf howls outside in the snow for the whole meal. His back against his *drak-car*, a beer in the hand he points at the restaurant. From a distance, he drinks, he swears so my boss can hear, I imagine. Luckily, we can't hear him! The music drowns him out. I do hope it's the same inside the restaurant.

Bum-numbingly awful, he's got me in the poo up to my neck! I have to wait for his broken record to calm down from going round and round... After two hours, his battery runs flat. I go back to see my boss, tail between my legs, not confident, *not-at-all-at-all!*

Me — I'm sorry, sorry, sorry about his behaviour. Truly, for you as much as for me! I'll pay for us both.

The boss — No. However... you can pack your bags. And he fires me.

Except that, at the time, it didn't go like that, *not-at-all-at-all!* The boss is a pro, he stays perfectly courteous.

The boss — No, that's fine. You didn't eat anything.

Me — Yes, really, I insist.

The boss — It's on me, my treat.

I accept, unconvinced, *not-at-all-at-all!* I don't like owing him a favour... but seeing as he still hasn't paid me, frankly, it suits me. Revenge is a dish best served frozen. Forced to wait for my pay: he drags it out until the very last customer. It's a fight between two fighting cocks with oversized egos, and I'm the prize: the Christmas turkey! Stuffed with chestnuts! Lovely New Year's present: a year of hell!

The Viking throws me out of his *drak-car* three times, in the middle of the night, in the snow, at -6 °C outside. Seen from here, it's slapstick. Seen from inside, it's Greek tragedy. Failure to assist a person in danger. Luckily, my body has reserves and my car is safe: I play the radio in my head: "*Roxanne, you don't have to put on the car*"

light!" I've become his precarious tenant of love, his part-time luxury rough sleeper.

The next day, in the middle of a massage, all of a sudden, a chill runs down my spine. A flash of clarity. The boss has no customers left and wants to fire me. The Viking wants to leave and get me fired so I'll follow him to his kingdom. I feel the vice tightening. Tipped off by my cosmic antenna, it's confirmed when I get home from work.

The Viking speeds up my execution — I can't stand waiting for him to pay you any longer. Let him find a solution, I'm leaving.

The boss — I haven't got a solution! Bye! And he fires me!

Worse, I find out later he made out I'd resigned! The rat!

I hate the mountains! I'll say it again, and I'll sign it.

They both won. Each of them got what he wanted.

And me? I'm stuffed! On ice!

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — So, you want to rescue the damsel in distress to get even with the big bad wolf of a boss?

The Viking — Naturally, I'm her Robin Hood, her knight in shining armour!

The author — My Prince Charming? You throw me out at -6 °C! Got nothing more romantic in stock? More like a panicking teenager with an imaginary sword!

The Viking — She gets on my nerves! She talks nonsense, she never understood me! When the police knock at the door, it's *Ragnarök*. The runes are bad. My territory is violated. I set sail.

The journalist — How do you keep your head above water?

The author — At the time? I have lots of sleepless nights, when sleeping is my passion. And afterwards, I try to solve these absurd situations with humour, with this very book, in fact.

The Viking — You're putting me to sleep, you're a walking sleeping pill! Are you ill? You're usually funnier!

The journalist — Can you tell us more about him?

The author — Oh, he's brilliant, charming, popular... with a lucky-dip option! When I end up in his *drak-car*, I soon notice his odd reactions: intrusive, bossy, extreme... ly

fond of a can. The hero drags his baggage behind him and plays the drama queen. So, naturally, the people close to him drift away... In the end, he's deeply sad to find himself all alone, despite his charm, his good intentions and his manly strength. At the time, I saw his manoeuvre. But it took me a book and a jazz club to find out why.

The journalist — You ask yourself a lot of questions!

The author — Loads! First I let the emotion out, then my truffle-hunting nose... (*she sniffs like a truffle hound*) I sniff, I sniff, I sniff... under the surface, for the big fear hiding behind it.

The journalist — In a game of truth, what do you think of each other?

The Viking — Oh, she's a wonderful woman! Who suffers from a very nasty addiction: compassion. To avoid conflict, she can't say no. And she idealises the romantic side of her life. Rather charming, actually, but a pity, especially for her, because she doesn't really realise what she needs.

The author — And of course, you think you know what I need, while putting my survival at risk! But my name isn't Roxanne. Spending nights outside isn't my thing.

The Viking — So why were you such a doormat? Why didn't you react?

The author — Setting my limits takes time. So I managed to ban you from quick fixes.

The Viking — You had nothing left, you should have come home with me to *Lower Valhalla*. It was logical! But you didn't love me!

The author — No job and no Troll-speak: too risky! I needed work. I did everything to find some. I loved you!

The Viking — See, you admit it! I knew it! You're hopeless at negotiating! I'd never have admitted it in your shoes!

The author — No, you're the one who'd have said *I love you so much*, purely to hear me answer *I love you too*!

The Viking — That's below the belt, you ungrateful woman! I did everything for you!

The author — Yes, above all convincing yourself! But it's just your ego rocking you to sleep.

The journalist — And how should she have reacted to her boss, in your view?

The Viking — A good knee between the legs now and then, it does you good!

The author — Of course, I should have thought of that! And with you as the punchbag!

The Viking — Good idea! I bet you'd have written a bestseller and we'd have stood a better chance of making our romance work!

The author — Yes! Like *Elizabeth and Darcy*², *Harry and Sally*³, *Scarlett and Rhett*⁴!

The Viking — Nothing more recent? But then again, you're not wrong... Even if I find it hard to admit, I think I like it when you shut me up, naughty *Fräulein*. It's exciting!

The author — You say that afterwards, but at the time, you never let go! It's like us in real life: people find us well matched and very funny together. And yet, in the novel, there's no chemistry between us.

The Viking — See, that right there is exactly the kind of thing you don't say in an interview.

The author — Oh right, so I can't tell the truth without your approval.

The Viking — Not if you want people to read your book. Just say: "*we're funny from start to finish.*" You really can't sell yourself, stupid French woman!

The journalist — Let's talk about your rows, it's funnier!

The Viking — We have middle-aged rows, we met late in life.

The author — Yeah. Like two pacifists trying to have a fight.

The Viking — With a feather under the feet! I have great fun winding her up.

2 Jane Austen, *Pride and Prejudice* (ActuaLitté, extract).

3 Rob Reiner and Nora Ephron, *When Harry Met Sally* (Time Out).

4 Victor Fleming, *Gone with the Wind* (Allociné).

The author — The worst was when you used to shout, hammering the table with your muscly finger...

The Viking — You wanted to do the same, and your finger snapped clean.

The author — I had to wear a splint and you were laughing your head off!

The Viking — You're so clumsy, stupid French woman! Without your work tool, we could finally leave! It was hilarious!

The journalist — And you, are you never ill?

The Viking — I wait until I'm at death's door to see a doctor. It's cultural... My antibodies resist everything. I'm an old weed seed, indestructible. Unlike you French, who pop pills like sweets all day long, just because they're on prescription. And then you're surprised you get diabetes!

The journalist — Perfect segue! On the cooking front, what do you suggest to the reader?

The author — To write their own recipe for a festive dinner gone wrong*.

The journalist — And these days, do the mountains tempt you?

The author — How can I put it... *some have tried, they had problems...*⁵

⁵ Chevallier et Laspalès, Le train pour Pau (YouTube).



The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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