

Chapter 7

Ring ring, my parents

Daniel Pennac — The Malaussène Saga

The tribe is the chaos we love best.

You don't kill ogres, you learn to live with them.

To love is to take the hits with style.

Yoga. We are all lying down in deep meditation, our inner being sending our love out to the world. Absolute silence. We are all "ONE"...

DRRRRIIINNG

All that collective compassion condenses onto me. With every ring, poisoned arrows of love rip through my voodoo-doll innards!

...

The torture takes a break. General relief.

...

DRRRRIIINNG Then it starts looping again. My inner being leaps up to answer, out of sheer survival instinct!

Me — (It's a test of patience. Whoever gets annoyed loses.)

(whispering) — Hello, Mum!

Mum — Hello, darling, how did your yoga class go?

Me — Brilliant! Perfect timing, you've got a real gift! You're calling me in the middle of meditation. My dignity has just run out of the room!

Mum — You should switch your phone off, you're disturbing everyone. Aren't you ashamed?

Me — Too late. The community of peaceful yogis has kindly shown me to the door.

Salsa. So I went for salsa... it's friendly, we'll have a great time...

Except things have changed... here, you can tell straight away that dancing is serious business. People dance in silence, faces locked in concentration.

The teacher announces — Get into pairs.

Instantly, the couples join their other halves. I head towards the only man without a partner.

Me — Hello, lovely to meet you. Coraline.

Clearly embarrassed, he doesn't answer, doesn't look at me either, come to think of it... I can tell making friends is going to be child's play!

The teacher counts the steps. He counts along with his lips... but strangely, not with his feet? Stiff legs, locked hips, limp lead... he holds me with his fingertips... clammy ones... He looks ready to bolt. It looks complicated! I sympathise. He and coordination are not on speaking terms.

The teacher calls out — Change partners.

10 couples stay rooted to the spot, thunderstruck. Clearly, they've all been hit by the same thunderbolt. They stay as welded together as the statues of Pompeii. Eyes locked, nothing else exists around them...

The teacher calls out — Music!

Yes! All is not lost! I sway in time... but the others just listen, motionless. I very much fear the music is optional. It's played in slow motion, on and off, as background noise. So that's why we white people have no rhythm! We learn to dance without it, obviously!

DRRRRIIINNG

And here we go again! There you are, that'll teach me to make fun, now it's my turn! At the other end of the ballroom, my phone is screaming. The teacher loses her count. Everyone freezes. Deathly silence. ... If I move, everyone will know it's me.

Me — (Please, God! Make it stop.)

God — ...

Me — (Thank you!)

General relief. The teacher picks up her explanations.

DRRRRIIINNG

No choice, I'm going. My new friends shoot me filthy looks. All the way across the ballroom, I apologise to every couple I pass:

— Oops, that's the alarm reminding me to switch off the ringer, my new personalised alarm clock is on the blink.

DRRRRIIINNG (this room goes on for ever)

— It's my small contribution to this evening's sound show.

DRRRRIIINNG (it was built for waltzing, the space never ends)

— My fan club does everything to make me popular, my parents are the presidents.

DRRRRIINNG (made it to the far end of the football pitch) impossible to stop my mobile. My parents have cracked the code. It always rings when it's them. They've programmed a nuclear alert, with reinforced protection. It takes 3 passwords to unlock it.

"Urgent" "Mum" "Dad"

DRRRRIINNG

My finger swipes, but the screen stays locked! One day, someone will have to explain to me what's wrong with this screen.

...

...

Phew! The ringing finally stops! My mobile unlocks, like magic! 7 missed calls! Oh crikey, they're hunting me down! They won't let go until I've answered! I fire off a text right away:

I'm in dance class. Switch! Silent mode!

At the end of the class, the teacher suggests I leave my new *salsero* friends to their counting... and move up to level 2 salsa.

A week later... right in the middle of a tricky move: *Doble sombrero de la plancha del brazzero enchoufla dilekeno dilekesi... qué no, qué no, qué si, qué si! Olé!*

Miracle! Not a single *DRRRRIINNG*.

I just left my mobile at home.

When I get back, my sister, clearly livid, is stationed outside my door, ready to identify my body. My panicking parents have mistaken her for the fire brigade! I open the door: 7 missed calls! My red-hot mobile is still smoking!

Saturday night. *Live* music at a friend's place, on her vineyard estate.

My friends — So, word is you've met someone?

Me — Yes, here he is, he's coming! Sverre, meet Cathy, Natalia, Anouk...

My friends (taking me aside) — Wow! Where on earth did you dig him up? He fell from the sky, he's an asteroid! He's gorgeous! Ask him if he's got any friends to introduce us to!

DRRRRIINNG

My friends — Is that your fan club?

Me — Sorry, I keep my phone on, in case the President calls me to save France.

My mother — Hello, darling? It's noisy where you are, who are you with?

Me — With some very shady people, my friends and the Viking.

I turn back to them — My parents say hello.

My friends — Thanks, hello to them too.

I finish the evening call... *click*.

My friends — But you're 50!

Me — Thanks, that's sweet, 54 actually! *Anyway.*

My friends — Your parents still call you every evening?

Me — Yes, and sometimes several times a day!

My friends — You're not 12 any more, OH THE SHAME!

Me — I know, I've tried everything, nothing's changed. So I own it.

I lost all credibility in my friends' eyes ages ago. Nobody takes me seriously any more, about anything. Game over!

And then, out of the blue, the Viking, who doesn't understand our language, announces to everyone — No! They are very... kind! ... I like!

From the top of his 2 metres, the Viking has just set the cat among the pigeons. A 2-metre cat. My friends are left speechless! So am I! Apart from my father, he's the only one who's ever stood up for me, unbelievable! It saves me trotting out my lame excuse:

— Apparently, my phone has a better social life than I do.

I look at him, my eyes full of love and infinite gratitude! My giant Cupid with the angel's smile takes me by the waist and kisses me for a long time. At that moment, I would have followed him anywhere.

Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — What's your ringtone?

The author — Nightingale song... since dolphins weren't an option!

The journalist — Do your parents still worry?

The author — Yes, but I stopped taking it personally a long time ago. It's their way of loving, of keeping the bond alive, they're checking everything's fine. They're scared, I play it down, it reassures them, we laugh about it, it's a game.

And sometimes, I switch the phone off. Silence. Peace. Freedom.

5 minutes... then I switch it back on. You never know: if I don't answer, they'll send my sister on a commando operation to check I'm still breathing. Wake her up and she's a bear with PMS, I'd rather avoid that! I don't want her to get cross, and she's always so cheerful otherwise.

The Viking — So if you don't call, you're dead?

The author — Yes, dead funny! ... Unless The Axe gets there first.

The Viking — Not in front of witnesses.

The author (to the audience) — Thank you, audience, for saving me from being buried alive. I'd be nothing without you.

The audience applauds.

The journalist — The ratings are fantastic. Thank you all. So let's carry on our journey together.

The Viking (haranguing the crowd) — Warriors, men and women, and all of you who have never held an oar! Today, you are all Vikings! I have the honour, the privilege and the pleasure of opening the gates of my kingdom to you! Over there, we are the proud descendants of the gods: even the mountains lay down so as not to cast a shadow over us! Our dykes have held back the sea for 1,000 years, and our children sail before they can walk! Our queen has already seen you coming in her visions! And Thor himself comes to stock up in my warehouse! So, without further ado, are you ready for adventure? Climb aboard to discover the land of the gods of trade, the cradle of heroes, the one, the only... *Lower Valhalla!* *OVERSTAG!!!!* You're going to love it!

The audience: does a Mexican wave for him! General euphoria.

The author — It's true, he's incredible! With him, there's no risk, what could possibly go wrong?

The Hammock and the Hummingbirds

A novel by Karine Baridon



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