Chapter 19

Monolong

Alexandre Astier — Kaamelott
No, I really think you should stop saying things... I could kill you, I reckon... with grief! I swear, it's not nice! You mustn't talk to people any more!

Pierre Dac
If it were up to me, I'd always agree with myself.

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I should have smelt a rat the moment I heard his legendary nickname: *Iron Lance*, a razor-sharp spearhead, wonderfully bendy as objects go! I thought: this one must always be at the cutting edge, the driving force. *(Little did I know!)* The moment I hooked him, I should have thrown him straight back into the ocean. But no! I loved him so much I listened to him for hours and hours...

Colossal mistake! Listening to him! He talks all the time. He talks at the table, he talks in bed, he talks in traffic jams, he talks in the shower, he even talks in his sleep! And above all, he listens to himself talk, with his very own voice-over!

Me, opposite? A visual aid, a marker post, a decorative flutter of eyelashes. After six months of telephone siege? I've become one burning ear, buzzing non-stop, holding out on sheer endurance, putting up, worn out, with six months of encirclement and blockade.

I say something? He bounces back, but not off what I said, off what he would have said in my place, and off he goes on his own. He's training for the verbal marathon, with no water stations and no finish line.

I come out of it having chased after him, trying to keep up. My mistake: trying to work out where he's going with it! Head down over the handlebars, not an ounce of perspective. Don't!

I run twice as far as he does! I arrive drained, washed out, wrung dry!

"*The Pianist's Groupie*": that's the word for me. A perfect title for my book.

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3h33 of “monolong”. I couldn't get a word in! It's not a conversation, it's a monologue sponsored by a beer brand. I lost him at the water station. The further he runs, the more legless he gets, but with words.

His sentences are so loooong... they've run out of full stops. No really, I looked everywhere, every full stop has done a runner! Like an 80s cassette stuck on an endless loop.

A Viking who listens to himself talk is bad enough, but a Viking who thinks he's *“the Rune Master”* in person takes the biscuit! He plays every part: *the Lawspeaker*, *the Council* and the whole *Thing*, all by himself. Faced with him, even sea monsters surrender! He scrambles my brain because he mangles English syntax, admires himself and laughs at his own jokes. He says everything and its opposite in the same sentence, the very one he started 3h33 ago!

Meanwhile, he's run the whole gamut of emotions, supplied every explanation, every proof. He's even invented ancient runes to back up his arguments.

The Rune Master got fed up and adjourned the session, but he carries on haranguing. *The Council of Elders* has cleared off for dinner. He just keeps holding forth as if nothing had happened.

I put the phone down, checked an hour later: he's still talking. I made dinner, ate, did the washing-up... he's still yakking, nattering, rabbiting on! While I'm brushing my teeth, I tell him:

Me — Right, I'm really tired now!

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He carries on as if nothing had happened! He's bound to have put me on mute, he can't even hear me! If I'm not careful, he'll make me miss my bedtime book, so I insist he finishes his sentence. He does, grudgingly, and keeps the last word with a stylistic flourish:

Him — *“Blah blah blah... so you see I'm right.”*

(I take a deep breath.) I'll be honest, I'm not going to lie to you. Frankly, at this point in the evening, I know full well it's not true! But if I tell him, he'll go round again for round 2 and I'll never get to bed. Worse, he'll make me miss the rest of the plot! And above all, I need... SILENCE! Because he's fried my brain with his background noise...

So I give in, I fold, like at poker. The parrot of the *Thing* has worn me down with his TED Talk. I go for a compromise, dignity oblige!

Me — *Mm-hmm (neither yes nor no). Good night, my love! Click.*

Phew! My temples are on fire, my ears are still ringing, my headache has my brain in a vice, and he's the one who's been drinking!

Ding! Light-bulb moment!

That's why he's training! He's like a child who won't go to bed because he's scared of the dark. So he talks a lot to drink even more. He waits until he's completely plastered to fall asleep mid-sentence.

For my part, I reckon that after listening to him for 3h33, it's my turn. So I open my mouth, and before I've finished my regulation minute, he's snoring the sleep of the just down the phone.

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Me — Hello?...

No answer. It's so frustrating, you have no idea! He pulls that one on me every time! And every time I fall for it like a total rookie!

And the next day? He doesn't remember a thing! He's forgotten it all! The insults, the nasty remarks and other charming horrors he flung in my face.

Him — What are you on about?

Doctor Jekyll and Mister Hyde. Split personality.

When he says “Hello”, he lets out his battle cry: “Attack!”, followed by 3h33 of siege every night. Chatty as a parrot and drunk as a lord! Ding! Now I finally get what *Iron Lance* means! “Charge!” He hurls his iron lances and his flat irons straight at my head! My ear is still ringing from the blow! Looking back, it's actually quite funny and, let's face it, he's well and truly loaded!

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Sunday Is Showtime!

The journalist — So you've turned the conflict into a literary “work”?

The author — If art is what's never been done before, I'm done for! Lovers at war have been done to death since Adam and Eve!

The Viking — Too right, baby, not a hope of going viral with that. Zero plot and a pack of lies!

The author — Thanks for the plug! Who needs enemies?

The Viking — You're welcome. I'm opening your eyes out of pure charity, so you won't be too disappointed.

The author — I can always count on you!

The Viking — Let's be realistic! Your vision is completely self-centred: you're the only *workforce* on your cash-in-hand *work* of art. You spend your days navel-gazing and processing your emotions 24/7, since you never go out. But however hard you get to *work*, with your legendary head for business, it's more like charity *work*, so whatever *works*! But we like you, so we'll keep you!

The author — I'd noticed, you keep an eye on me, mostly! Right, *next!*

(She turns to the journalist.) Quick, ask me a question, or we'll never be able to stop him.

The journalist — I believe you've written a thesis on the subject?

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The author — Indeed, after analysing the data, the results are startling! Sober, he talks logically. Drunk, it's as if his logic were watching a quiet programme while his emotions and his survival instinct watch a war film on a loop. No wonder he doesn't remember a thing the next day: he wasn't watching the same channel! I called it the Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde syndrome! My mistake: looking for logic on the wrong channel. My only way out: hanging up! *(It took me a while to work that out.)*

The journalist — Why so much beer?

The Viking — Beer is the mead of the 21st century, it helps me articulate my philosophical point.

The author — Very philosophical indeed: *"See, I'm right."*

The Viking — That's a universal axiom.

The author — He drinks so he won't bump into his big fear in the dark, but the opposite happens: his logic nods off, and his big fear lives precisely in his emotions and his survival instinct. A snake eating its own tail! QED. So, like Pac-Man, he races down the motorway of his fears with beer for fuel, firing non-stop at anything that moves, especially me, for 3h33, for six months! He got me hammered and I never touched a drop!

The Viking *(puts down his beer)*

— Let me stop you right there! If I shut up, I think. And if I think, I panic. So I talk. It's training, to keep up my stamina.

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The author — Your liver's stamina, more like! Odin himself challenged you to see who could drink the most. He's still rolling around under the table!

The Viking — You don't understand a thing! I'm a poet. Every beer is a meditation, every sip a heroic poem. When you love, you don't count the cost!

The author — Well, the figures are conclusive: he drank 4,026 beers, 1,329 litres, 44 kegs, 6 barrels, 2 and a half casks, 2.6 tonnes! 22 beers a night, 1 beer every 10 minutes!

The journalist — At that point, he's a human brewery!

The author — Precisely! I checked: giants have a digestive system that can handle the output of a hop factory. He sinks more beer than a pub at happy hour. Enough to get an army singing or send a whole village to sleep...

The journalist — No wonder he's out like a light after 3h33!

The Viking — Statistics, what a joke! The only exact science you can make say whatever you like! You're time-dyslexic, you can't count! It's strategic: numbers are just there to impress the enemy!

The author — Yeah, right! You build a wall of beer round your camp and fight from inside it. After 22 beers, you sing heroic songs to your battering ram, bang your head against the wall, convinced I'm your enemy. And you fall asleep in the middle of your emotional siege!

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The Viking — At least I'm romantic! Come on, let's drink to it:

“To the love of beer and battle!”

The author — *“To your brave liver and my fried brain!”*

The journalist — 183 days, though, that takes some stamina!

The author — I demand a medal and some emotional time off in lieu!

The Viking — I wanted us to love each other intensely! Three hours a day is normal for a couple.

The author — Normal for psychological torture at Guantanamo, maybe! Not for a *“love talk”* that ends in an alcoholic coma!

The journalist — Were you aware she was part of the conversation?

The Viking — Technically, she only had to interrupt me.

The journalist — You're an expert in verbal diarrhoea! You should open a pub theatre!

The Viking — True, I'm an orator, a troubadour of the word!

The author — I'd say more *Radio Viking FM*, volume 200%, 24/7, adverts included.

The Viking — What did you do to break the spell of the never-ending word?

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The author — I invoked the sacred incantation: *“You carry on. I'm stopping.”* I left him alone with his echo.

The Viking *(sulking)*

— You could have let me finish my point.

The author — It was a never-ending circle!

The journalist — Why did you answer?

The author — Occupational hazard. Listening, trying to understand, trying to raise awareness. Works a treat in my job. On a Viking at 3 a.m. with four beers' head start, the success rate is more debatable!

The Viking — We called a truce, we saw each other again in *Lower Valhalla*, winter was romantic, we made peace...

The author — Thank goodness! Without a ceasefire, I was at the end of my tether, I wouldn't wish it on anyone! *“I'm free, I decide.”* Oh, sure! I was just shattered after that marathon...

The Viking — I wanted you to fight for me!

The author — And I, subtle difference, wanted to live in peace with you! And preferably not in your igloo of angst, as romantic as a chest freezer with Wi-Fi!

The journalist — And now that winter's over?

The author — I survived a Viking winter without fleeing to Lapland. Conclusion: nothing glorious about holding out if it wears me down. The more he insists, the more scared I get, the more I back off, the more he's scared of losing me, the more he insists. The never-ending loop! He

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insists to get closer, he drives me away. I think I'm protecting myself, I fuel his insistence. Totally counterproductive!

The journalist — And today?

The author — Today, the punchbag days are over. I'd rather curl up in my hammock and protect my peace, it's simpler. Anyway, if it's not simple, it's not for me!

The journalist — Moral: if the battering ram breaks down the door... you can always climb out of the window.

The Viking — It's starting to sink in! Thanks to me, you're learning to say no! Come on, let's not fall out. Come and have one last drink with me after the show to sign the peace treaty!

The author — Did you say “PEACE”? I'll sign right now, if you tick the *“no monologues”* box! But I'm wary of your mood swings, Dr Jekyll and Mister Hyde. You could, without a qualm, spring some little clause buried in the small print, and the mere thought of it turns my stomach!

The Viking — Something like *“sorry baby, but we don't really love each other”*. I'll have your book pulled from the shelves so you can't discredit me, and sue you for damages. Because you're so famous! I don't know which of us is the bigger megalomaniac. You break every record, you're like my father: Narcissus the Second, all drama and showbiz!

The author — You've got a point. I suppose with the money from the lawsuit, you'll make a film about the Viking, starring yourself, obviously. Starlets will be

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fighting to play opposite you. Not to mention you'll make me change the ending to give it a *happy ending*.

The Viking — So why on earth would I make sure nobody reads your novel? You're completely delusional! With me in it, your book has potential, I turn everything to gold! I've always told you: first I pocket the dosh, then I cash in on the adaptations. I confirm, you have absolutely no head for business!

The author — By the way, rumour has it that behind your cover as a *"yoga teacher"*, you run a nice little business?

The Viking — Indeed, an adaptation will be no problem at all: I handle the contracts for the biggest films of recent years. And *The Axe*'s cousin can lean on James Cameron!

The author — Really? How sweet!

The Viking — No, it's just an advance on commission. It's called doing business!

The author — Oh, how romantic!

The Viking — It's not romantic, it's lucrative! May I remind you I'm remarried. I've got a family to feed and a lifestyle to keep up. Next week, I'm off to a yacht race in Sydney. And you, how are you getting on with your minimum wage? Caught up with it yet? If you spend your time writing instead of working, it's not going to happen!

The author — Some people turn the page. I write it!

The Viking — A 47-chapter page about me?

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The author — Not just you! I was only catching up. Now that I can finally get a word in, I'm letting rip!

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