Our Little Lack of Punctuality

The plan for everything didn't account for them



Laura Bellini

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CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - Conditions Not Included in the Schedule.....10
Chapter 2 - An Hour That Wasn't in the Plan 20
Chapter 3 - When the Plan Is No Longer Enough.....31
Chapter 4 - After Closing Time 41
Chapter 5 - The Right to My Own Time..... 55
Chapter 6 - Not Everything Needs to Be Measured 65
Chapter 7 - Almost Everything as Usual..... 77
Chapter 8 - A Place Where I'm Not the Boss 90
Chapter 9 - A Risk You Can't Put on a Schedule.....104
Chapter 10 - No Plan for Tomorrow 122
Chapter 11 - Things You Can't Put on a Calendar.....138
Chapter 12 - A Promise That Was Too Big 149
Chapter 13 - The Price of a Bigger Opportunity 162
Chapter 14 - The Things We Don't Say Straight Away..... 177
Chapter 15 - Everything We Never Agreed To 191
Chapter 16 - The Distance Between Us..... 202
Chapter 17 - Each of Us on Our Own.....213
Chapter 18 - The First Step Without Guarantees..... 223
Chapter 19 - Not Everything Can Be Fixed at Once..... 236
Chapter 20 - Our Little Lack of Punctuality 249

INTRO

By seven forty-three, I had already had two coffees, spoken to a driver who had mistaken the entrance gate, and assured three different people that everything was going according to plan. The last assurance had been delivered over the phone to the festival sponsor while I stood in the middle of a courtyard in Gdańsk, where the wind coming off the Motława River kept flipping the pages of my schedule. I didn't bother looking at them. I knew what was supposed to happen at every hour, where the ceramics display counter was meant to stand, and when the technicians were supposed to switch on the exhibition lighting. My schedule was clear, mapped out down to five-minute intervals and — so far — completely immune to reality.

"Of course we'll be ready on time," I said into the phone. "The guests will arrive punctually, and the exhibition will be ready before the opening."

I ended the call before the other person could ask whether I had seen the shipment of artworks yet. I hadn't. It was supposed to have arrived before seven, but the driver wasn't answering, and the person responsible for unloading insisted that one of the crates was missing from the delivery list. Under normal circumstances, this would have been a problem to solve. That morning, however, every problem seemed to have its own watch, and all of them were running faster than I was.

For a moment, I stared at my phone screen as though a message might suddenly appear and change the situation. Nothing came. I slipped the device into my pocket and headed towards the hall where the craft exhibition was due

to open. I needed to see the space before I started moving people and objects around. Changing the order of things in a schedule was easy on paper. In reality, it meant ten more phone calls, someone's bruised pride, and the inevitable question of why I had once again promised something I couldn't guarantee.

I hated that question. Not because I didn't know the answer, but because I knew it far too well. Whenever I said, "I'll manage," people stopped looking for alternative solutions. They treated my words as a commitment, and I would rather carry too much than admit that I had overlooked something. Over the years, I had built a reputation as the person who could save an event at the very last minute. I rarely mentioned how often that last minute began with my own miscalculation.

The hall was still dim. Strips of tape marking the walking routes lay across the floor, while crates bearing the names of several workshops stood against one wall. One of them was open. Inside, resting on a layer of grey foam, was the wooden frame of a clock — beautiful, but incomplete. The dial was missing. I crouched to check the label, but before I could read the name of the workshop, I heard a calm voice behind me.

"If you keep staring at it like that, the hands aren't going to appear by themselves."

I turned around.

A man stood beside a table positioned beneath the window. His sleeves were rolled up over the forearms of a dark shirt, and an assortment of small tools, most of whose names I didn't know, was spread across the tabletop. He didn't look like someone who had simply come to drop off an

exhibit. He worked with a concentration that seemed almost deliberate in this particular setting. As if there were no festival happening around him, no one moving tables, checking cables, or trying to convince the world that everything was ready.

"And if I stare long enough, perhaps someone will finally bring the missing part," I replied.

He raised his eyes. He didn't smile, but something in his expression suggested amusement.

"Parts don't appear just because you wait for them."

"Neither do people. And yet we need all of them here."

For a second, he studied me as though trying to decide whether I was serious. Then he put down his tweezers and gestured towards the crate.

"This isn't a complete piece. It shouldn't be displayed."

"I know. I'm checking the labels."

"In that case, please don't move it."

I left the crate untouched, although I was tempted to remind him that I was the one responsible for the venue, the transportation, and the safety of the entire event. Instead, I straightened up and looked at his table. A watch mechanism lay on a small mat, dismantled into pieces so tiny that, from where I stood, they looked like scattered metal crumbs. The man moved one of them a fraction of a centimetre. His hands were steady, but not rigid. He worked without rushing, as though precision didn't require him to fight against time.

"Are you one of the exhibitors?" I asked.

"Sambor Róg. Watchmaker. And I'm responsible for this section of the exhibition."

I introduced myself, giving him my surname and professional title. He acknowledged the information with a brief nod, without the polite admiration that usually accompanied the word "producer." There was something refreshing about that. And irritating. I couldn't decide which more.

"In that case, you probably know we have a very tight schedule," I said.

"I know a clock won't start running faster just because we put it in a schedule."

This time, he smiled, barely noticeably. His voice was lower than I had expected, and he spoke without any deliberate sternness. He wasn't trying to embarrass me. He simply had no intention of pretending that my deadlines could change the properties of things.

"And I know an exhibition won't open by itself," I replied. "Someone has to make sure the people and the objects end up in the right places."

"I agree. Just not necessarily in that order."

Before I could answer, my phone rang.

The driver. Finally.

I walked a few steps away, listening to his explanations about traffic, diversions, and a crate that had apparently been left behind at the warehouse. I asked for the shipment number, the estimated arrival time, and the name of the person who had confirmed the loading. His answers didn't add up to anything I could put into my schedule. When I ended the call, Sambor was still standing at his table. He hadn't been listening in, but he didn't need to. My expression must have told him everything.

"It's not going to arrive on time?" he asked.

"I don't know that yet."

"Which means it won't arrive on time."

"It means I don't have confirmation."

"I understand the difference. I'm not sure your sponsor does."

I didn't like the fact that he had hit the mark. I liked even less that he had said it without any satisfaction. There was no triumph in him, no sense of a man waiting for someone else to make a mistake. Instead, there was the patience of someone who had seen how haste could damage something that wasn't easily repaired.

"I'll take care of it," I said.

"I don't doubt that."

The short sentence sounded more like an observation than a compliment. I wanted to ask what exactly he thought of me after three minutes of conversation, but I didn't. I didn't need another thing to explain or another person to whom I would have to prove that I could keep everything under control.

I left the hall with my phone in my hand and a schedule that had just stopped being credible. In the courtyard, someone was setting up wooden display stands, and the sound of a tram drifted in from the street. Gdańsk was waking up regardless of whether my exhibition was ready. I entered a new time into the schedule, then deleted it because I wasn't sure I wasn't making another promise I couldn't keep.

Usually, I could find a solution before anyone noticed there was a problem. This time, someone had already

noticed — a man who clearly had no intention of helping me pretend that time could be persuaded to cooperate. And although I didn't know Sambor Róg yet, I had a feeling he wouldn't be easy to fit into my plan.

The question was whether I could allow him into something I had no idea how to plan.

Chapter 1 - Conditions Not Included in the Schedule

By the time I returned to the hall, my conversation with the driver had turned into three more phone calls, two messages from the technical coordinator, and one question from the sponsor that I had no intention of answering until I had something more substantial than a guess. I had the impression that the entire festival had decided to test how many times the same person could be asked to solve a problem before she started speaking exclusively in bullet points. Unfortunately, I had no time for philosophical reflections. The opening was only a few hours away, and the exhibition, which was supposed to be the main attraction of the first day, existed for now primarily in my documents.

Sambor was still working at the table. He had merely changed tools. Now he was leaning over a small mechanism, arranging its components on a pale mat at carefully measured intervals. When I entered, he didn't raise his head, but I was certain he had noticed me. Some people had a way of showing they were aware of your presence without interrupting whatever they were doing. It was irritating, particularly when you wanted them to deal with your problem immediately.

"I need to know exactly what's missing from this section of the exhibition," I said.

He put down his tool and straightened up.

"Right now? The dial, two mounting components, and the protective support for transportation. The frame itself is complete, but we can't assemble it yet."

"So we need three things."

"No. We need four, if you include the time required to assemble everything safely."

"Time isn't something you can order and collect from a warehouse."

"Which is precisely why we shouldn't pretend we can move it around whenever we like."

I looked at him with an irritation I didn't even attempt to conceal. Here I was, standing in front of a man who could calmly explain why something that absolutely had to be done couldn't be done. It wasn't even that he was wrong. It was that being right wasn't a particularly useful tool at that moment.

"Listen, Sambor. I'm not asking you to perform a miracle. I want to know what we can do with what we have."

"That's the first sensible question I've heard today."

"In that case, your day hasn't been particularly successful."

This time, his smile was more noticeable. Brief, as though he didn't want to admit that my response had amused him.

"Depends on how you count. I've managed to repair two mechanisms without damaging a third."

"Congratulations. I've managed to convince the sponsor that everything is under control."

"Is it?"

I didn't answer immediately. Instead, I unfolded the printed floor plan I carried in my folder and spread it across the table. I pointed to the central section of the exhibition space. The watchmaking display was supposed to occupy

the area near the windows, away from the main circulation route. I had planned four display stations, a demonstration table, and a small area where visitors could see working mechanisms up close. The works of the other craftspeople were supposed to surround them: ceramics, wood inlay, hand-bound notebooks, and brass objects. Together, they were meant to tell a story about things made with the kind of patience that seemed increasingly rare in everyday life.

"The shipment will arrive, but later than expected," I said. "I don't know the exact time yet. We can start with the components we already have and add the missing pieces when they get here."

Sambor studied the plan.

"Not all the stations can be prepared separately."

"Why not?"

"Because this exhibition isn't a random collection of objects. Each piece represents a different stage of the process. If we put the frame on display without the mechanism, visitors will see an attractive piece of wood and won't understand why it matters."

"We can put up an information panel."

"We could also write that the exhibition is complete and hope nobody notices the difference. I don't think that's a particularly good idea."

I studied him more carefully. He wasn't raising his voice, trying to take control of the conversation, or showing off his expertise. He spoke as though he were personally responsible for every object that had entered the hall. And he probably was. I knew exhibitors who arrived at events, set up their work, and expected the organisers to take care of everything else. Sambor looked like someone who

couldn't leave even the smallest component unattended without checking whether it had been properly secured.

"All right," I said. "What do you suggest?"

He pulled the plan towards himself.

"Instead of four stations, we'll have three. The demonstration table stays, but we won't place any exhibits there that depend on the missing components. I'll prepare a separate presentation using the mechanism I already have. When the shipment arrives, we'll decide what can be safely added."

"That means changing the layout of the entire exhibition."

"Yes."

"Moving two other stations."

"Probably."

"Creating extra work for the technical team."

"If we need their help, we'll have to ask them."

"An astonishingly simple approach."

"I never claimed it would be easy."

I took a deep breath. He was right, but his proposal meant admitting to the team that the original plan was no longer valid. I hated moments like that. Changing the schedule felt like a professional failure, even when it was the very thing that could save an event. Too often, I confused being effective with keeping promises, instead of recognising that effectiveness also meant making good decisions when circumstances changed.

"There's one more issue," I said. "The sponsor expects us to present the entire exhibition to the media representatives

at eleven. I can't simply tell them that some of the stations will be empty."

"You can tell them the presentation will take place in a revised format."

"You don't know my sponsor."

"And you don't know all my clocks yet."

I looked at him. This time, I couldn't tell whether he was attempting a joke or simply stating a fact. There was something unsettling about his calmness. He wasn't unpleasant, but he wasn't going to make my job easier by agreeing with everything I said. On the other hand, when he looked at the floor plan, he did so with such concentration that it was clear he genuinely wanted to find a solution rather than simply prove his position was correct.

"Fine. A revised format," I agreed. "But I need your help talking to the other exhibitors. If I ask them to move their stations, they'll want to know why."

"I'll tell them what happened."

"Without emphasising that it's my fault?"

"If they ask why the shipment didn't arrive, I'll explain that the shipment didn't arrive."

"And if they ask who's responsible for organising everything?"

"Then I'll tell them the truth."

I didn't particularly like that answer, although I couldn't find anything wrong with it. I was used to people in similar situations immediately looking for someone to blame. Sambor wasn't looking for anyone. He simply had no intention of participating in a version of events that was more convenient than reality.

We walked out into the corridor, where we ran into Ola, the technical coordinator. She had a measuring tape draped over her shoulder and a tablet in her hand. She stopped when she saw the two of us together.

"Marlena, please tell me we're not moving all the tables again."

"We're not moving all the tables," I replied.

"That's good."

"Just two."

Ola closed her eyes.

"I knew I shouldn't have asked."

I explained the situation and presented Sambor's proposal. She listened, asked a few questions about the power supply and the distances between the stations, and then started checking which members of the team were available. When she finished, she pointed at the watchmaker.

"If I'm going to move those tables, I need the dimensions of your display units. I'm not doing this by guesswork."

"I'll prepare them."

"Today?"

"In twenty minutes."

Ola looked at me approvingly.

"See? That's how you work with people. Specifics."

I wasn't sure whether that was meant as a compliment to him or a dig at me, but I decided not to dwell on it. I took the tablet, checked the technicians' availability, and divided up the tasks. Sambor went to prepare the measurements, while I started calling the exhibitors.

The first conversation was difficult. The second was even worse. The third ended with a promise that someone would think about the changes and get back to me. During the fourth, I was told that if the organisers couldn't keep track of their own deliveries, perhaps they shouldn't be organising festivals at all. I didn't respond. I wrote down the person's name, thanked them for the information, and ended the call.

When I put my phone away, Sambor was standing beside me with a sheet of paper covered in measurements.

"Everything all right?" he asked.

"That depends on whether we consider it all right when people remind me that I'm responsible for things I have no control over."

"You do have control over what you do next."

"That sounds like something that should be printed on a motivational mug."

"I wouldn't buy one."

"Neither would I."

For a moment, we stood side by side, looking across the hall. Workers were moving crates, someone was unrolling an extension cord, and the sound of a metal display stand falling echoed from the other end of the building. Sambor turned his head towards the noise but didn't immediately move. First, he made sure that the person responsible for the station had picked up the stand and hadn't hurt themselves. Only then did he turn his attention back to me.

"You don't have to do everything yourself," he said.

It didn't sound like consolation. More like a conclusion he'd reached after observing something specific.

"I know."

"You don't look like you do."

"Do you always tell people what they should be doing?"

"Only when I see them trying to do the work of three people."

"Maybe I simply don't like waiting for someone else to realise that something needs to be done."

"That's not the same as being unable to delegate."

I tightened my fingers around the tablet. I didn't want to have a conversation with him about my working methods. He didn't know me, he didn't know my team, and he knew nothing about all the commitments that had brought me to this point. And yet his observation had landed precisely on a subject I'd rather not touch.

"Please prepare those measurements," I said. "I'll take care of the rest."

"That's exactly what I'm talking about."

He turned and walked away before I could find an answer. I watched him for a moment, then returned to work. I had no intention of letting a stranger with a watchmaker's table and an unusually developed sense of responsibility judge my professional decisions.

Still, when I received his detailed drawing of the new layout twenty minutes later, I noticed that he had even included additional space for the person who would be operating the demonstration. He hadn't needed to do that. Providing the measurements would have been enough.

At eleven, the exhibition still wasn't complete, but its new layout was working. The media representatives had seen the first section of the display, and Sambor had spoken about a clock mechanism that had taken him several months to build.

I listened from the side. He didn't use grand words. He didn't try to impress the audience with technical details most people wouldn't understand without an explanation. He spoke about precision, patience, and how sometimes you had to take things apart to understand why they had stopped working.

People listened. Even the sponsor, who had earlier demanded confirmation that the exhibition was complete, was asking questions instead of making complaints. I realised I had been watching Sambor for longer than professional observation required.

When the demonstration ended, he approached me carrying an empty coffee cup.

"We survived," he said.

"It's only the beginning of the day."

"I know. I didn't say we'd won."

"Are you always this careful when describing success?"

"I prefer not to promise things I haven't done yet."

I accepted the remark with a faint sting of discomfort. There was something in it I didn't want to analyse in front of other people.

"In that case, don't make any declarations," I replied. "We still have several hours of work ahead of us."

"I wasn't planning to."

"Good."

"But I can say that you improvise rather well once you stop trying to pretend everything is going according to plan."

He raised his cup as though making a toast, then walked towards his station. I remained where I was, left with a

sentence that was both a compliment and an uncomfortably accurate observation.

For the first time that day, I wondered whether the missing shipment was the only problem.

Chapter 2 - An Hour That Wasn't in the Plan

By the afternoon, the festival had begun to resemble the event I had been promising everyone for several months. The first visitors appeared in the courtyard, conversations filled the hall, and the smell of freshly brewed coffee mingled with the scent of wood and the wax used by the craftspeople. The watchmaking exhibition was still waiting for its missing components, but the other stations were now operating without any major problems. At last, I could walk through the space without having to answer every question before anyone had even asked it.

That didn't mean I had time off. Messages were still appearing on my phone, and my task list contained so many remaining items that I could probably have turned them into a separate festival programme. Still, I decided to find ten minutes to check on the shipment. The driver informed me that the crate had been located and should reach Gdańsk in the late afternoon. He couldn't give me an exact time, but at least this time I had a shipment number and confirmation from the warehouse.

I called Sambor, although I wasn't sure he would answer. He picked up after the third ring.

"Hello?"

"I have an update about the shipment. The crate has been found. It should arrive today."

"Good."

I waited for some further reaction. There wasn't one.

"That's it?" I asked.

"What else were you expecting?"

"Perhaps a little enthusiasm."

"I don't know the delivery time."

"That's why I'm saying it should arrive."

"And that's exactly why I'm not celebrating."

I rolled my eyes, even though he couldn't see me.

"I need you to check this afternoon what can still be installed."

"When?"

"As soon as the shipment arrives."

"That's not a time."

"Sambor, I really don't have time right now to agree on exact minutes."

"Then let's not agree on minutes. Let's agree on a condition. Call me when you have confirmation that the crate is on site. I'll come over and inspect the contents."

"Can't you stay on the festival grounds?"

"I have my own workshop and orders that I can't keep postponing indefinitely."

That reminded me that he wasn't one of my employees. He was an exhibitor, the person responsible for his section of the exhibition, and a man with a life beyond my schedule. Over the past few hours, I had managed to forget that.

"All right," I said. "I'll call you."

"Thank you."

He ended the call without another word. I put my phone away and headed towards the exit. I still had a meeting with a representative of the local media, followed by a

conversation with the sponsor. During both, I tried to behave as though the day was unfolding exactly as planned. I wasn't lying outright, but neither was I explaining everything that still needed to be resolved. I knew the difference between keeping people informed and causing unnecessary alarm. The problem was that sometimes I pushed that boundary a little too far.

At around four, I received a message from the driver. The shipment was already in Gdańsk, but the vehicle was stuck unloading another order. He couldn't tell whether it would take fifteen minutes or an hour. I replied that I was waiting for further information, then called Sambor.

He didn't answer. I tried again a few minutes later. This time, I heard his voice, with the faint sound of metal tools in the background.

"I'm at the workshop."

"The crate is already in Gdańsk."

"At the festival grounds?"

"Not yet. The driver is finishing another delivery."

"Then I have nothing to inspect."

"I just wanted to let you know."

"All right. Let me know when it's on site."

"You could come earlier and wait."

"No."

He answered so quickly that for a moment I didn't know what to say.

"No?"

"I have work scheduled. I'm not going to sit in a car park waiting for a vehicle nobody can even locate."

"I'm not asking you to sit in a car park. I want us to be able to respond immediately."

"I'll respond when we know what we're responding to."

I felt that familiar tension building. One short no was enough to remind me of all the people who, over the past few hours, had been unable to make a decision until someone gave them an exact instruction.

"Not everything can be planned," I said.

"I agree. That's why it's useful to know what you can do when a plan stops working."

I didn't answer. For a moment, all I could hear was the quiet sound of tools being moved around.

"I'll be waiting for your call," he added. "Good luck with the rest of the festival."

He hung up before I could ask whether that was his version of wishing me luck or simply a way of ending the conversation.

At five thirty, the crate finally arrived. The driver brought it personally to the technical entrance, and I checked the labels before signing the delivery receipt. It was heavier than I had expected, with metal fittings and additional protective reinforcements on the corners. Inside were the dial, the mounting components, and a special support for transportation. However, there was no document confirming the condition of the contents, so I didn't want to open it without Sambor.

I called him.

"It's here."

"I'm on my way."

"How long will it take?"

"Forty minutes."

"Can you get here sooner?"

"I could, but I'm not going to drive faster just because you have a tight schedule."

I closed my eyes. Under normal circumstances, I would have replied with something unpleasant. This time, however, I held back. I needed his expertise, not another argument.

"Forty minutes," I repeated. "I'll wait by the technical entrance."

"All right."

When we ended the call, I was left alone with the crate and the uncomfortable feeling that there was nothing more I could do. It was a strange experience. For most of the day, I had been running between stations, solving problems, and answering questions. Now I could do nothing but wait. I sat on the low wall beside the entrance and watched people crossing the courtyard.

After twenty minutes, Ola called me.

"Everything all right with the shipment?"

"It's here."

"And Sambor?"

"On his way."

"Good. I saw him working this morning. He has a good eye."

"He also has an extraordinarily well-developed ability to say no."

Ola laughed.

"Maybe it's simply because he isn't your employee."

"I know."

"You didn't look like someone who remembered that."

I looked at my phone as though it were somehow responsible for the remark.

"Does everyone have something to say about me today?"

"Only the people who like you."

She hung up before I could ask whether that was supposed to be comforting.

Sambor arrived thirty-eight minutes later. He wasn't in a hurry, but he didn't waste any time either. He was wearing the same dark shirt, although his sleeves were rolled up a little higher now, and I noticed a small grease mark on one cuff. He was carrying a compact tool bag. When he saw me, he nodded.

"Show me the crate."

"Good afternoon to you too."

"Good afternoon, Marlena."

He said it with such seriousness that I couldn't help smiling.

"Here you go. Your long-awaited delivery."

He walked around the crate, inspected the locks and labels, and then asked me for the delivery receipt. He read it carefully before deciding to open the protective fastenings. He didn't rush anything. I watched him check every component before moving it even a few centimetres.

"Can you tell me what you're checking?" I asked.

"Whether the crate has been opened during transit and whether the protective fittings are intact."

"They look fine."

"Looking fine and being fine are two different things."

"Do you have an answer for everything?"

"No. That's why I check."

He opened the crate and removed the first layer of protective material. The dial was wrapped in soft fabric and placed inside a specially fitted frame. Sambor ran his fingers along the edge, examined the surface under the light, and then checked the mountings. He worked in silence. It wasn't an awkward silence, more like the kind in which each of us had a task to perform. I handed him the components one by one while he assessed their condition.

"Everything looks good," he finally said. "But I need a table and proper lighting."

"I'll arrange it."

"And nobody else at the station."

"That's more difficult."

"Why?"

"Because this is a festival. People will want to see what we're doing."

"Not during the assembly."

I studied him. He wasn't being rude, but there was a stubbornness about him that was impossible to mistake for a lack of confidence. He wasn't trying to convince me that his rules were the only ones that mattered. He simply wasn't prepared to abandon them because someone wanted a faster result.

"Fine. I'll give you half an hour without an audience."

"Forty minutes."

"Thirty-five."

"Agreed."

I looked at him in surprise. I had expected another round of negotiations.

"Just like that?"

"We've agreed on the conditions."

"You don't enjoy bargaining for the sake of it?"

"I enjoy it when agreements make sense."

I arranged a table, a lamp, and two technicians to help move the crate to the correct section of the hall. Sambor immediately indicated where it should stand and asked for one of the chairs to be moved out of the way. When everything was ready, he approached me.

"You can get back to your other duties now."

"This is my station."

"I know."

"And I want to see what you're doing."

For a moment, he looked at me without saying anything. Then he stepped aside, making room for me beside the table.

"In that case, stay. Just don't touch anything without asking."

"I'm thirty-three, Sambor. I know how to keep my hands to myself."

"I don't doubt that. I'd just rather not test the theory on an antique mechanism."

I laughed softly. I hadn't expected him to be funny. Earlier, I had mistaken his composure for a kind of emotional