

Geneviève
MONDRAN-RANJON



Soaring Together

MGR Éditions

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Translated from the French, Envolée à deux

Geneviève Mondran-Ranjon

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Original title: Envolée à deux. © MGR Editions, 2018 (French edition, ISBN 978-2-9519019-3-3).

English translation © MGR Editions, 2026. Digital edition, 2026.

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Foreword

Culturally, aviation is a male domain, sometimes even a macho one... Of course, women have been flying since the very beginning of this adventure in three dimensions. Some captured imaginations around the world long before the age of television, like the extraordinary Jean Batten, known in the 1930s as the Garbo of the skies. These extraordinary women became the exceptions that proved the rule. In a way, they gave the macho men a ready excuse: "Us, misogynists?"

But what we tend to forget is that, as in every human endeavor, behind every man who has made a valuable contribution to the history of this extraordinary adventure stands a woman, or several women. This book takes a fresh look at that fundamental truth: if you want to know who a man is, take an interest in his wife. And if you happen upon one of those rare couples who have learned how to make their relationship last, to the point that each speaks of the other as the love of their life, you will soon understand that neither could have become all they were capable of being without the other.

Marc and Geneviève are just such a couple: modern adventurers who, for all their polished manners, have lived through a thousand remarkable moments together. As a couple, they have shared everything, the good times and the bad, the intense fear and happiness that come with flying, the disappointments and the moments of jubilation, the action in the air and the bureaucratic headaches of bookkeeping, the honors and the times they were left in the lurch...

The Ranjons are proof that two people together can be more than the sum of their talents. Together, they become something new. And because they have always shared everything, they have told it all together in this book.

They do so in their own distinctive style, doing incredible things as though they were nothing at all...

We are now moving rapidly toward a world of aviation populated by systems operators rather than aviators, a world of flying machines

stripped of that mysterious little compartment called the cockpit, and spectacular drones that let us fly by proxy...

As we do, we find that Saint-Ex, the old sage, was right to insist that what matters is the human being, closing with these words:

“The termite colony of the future terrifies me, and I hate their robotic virtue. As for me, I was made to be a gardener.”

The Ranjons, Marc and Geneviève, are great gardeners too...

Bernard Chabbert

Her



1955, Boulevard Saint-Michel, Paris – The Mondran family – Geneviève on the left

Sunday, April 21, 1946. Easter Sunday. I've spent nine months in the dark. It's time to leave the nest, cozy as it is.

I've been told that Maman and I crossed all of Paris that day looking for a clinic.

So, setting out from the 5th arrondissement, near the Musée de Cluny, we landed in the 16th, where my birth was registered at the town hall under the names Geneviève, chosen in a hurry because my parents hadn't planned on a girl, Elisabeth, after the Queen of England, also born on April 21, and Pascale, in honor of Easter.

I've also been told that the weather was beautiful and the bells were ringing out at full peal that day. My family sees it as a good sign.

I'm the second child listed in the family record book, after my sister Catherine, who was born seventeen months before me.

When I opened that document, I realized that Papa the Colonel must have been disappointed to have yet another girl...

But hadn't he married the eldest of four daughters? For a long time, I thought it was the women who determined a child's sex. Nonsense...

Three years later, my sister Frédérique joined us. She owes her name to the city where she was born: Friedrichshafen, on the German shore of Lake Constance. Her middle name, Marie-France, came from a longing for home. Papa the Colonel had grown used to girls.

We were three pretty little girls, "little porcelain faces," as Great-Aunt Marie called us in her quavering voice.

Porcelain is fragile. I refused to think of myself as a fragile doll. My parents certainly wouldn't have argued. "Geneviève has a mind of her own. What a temper!"

Very early on, I became the biggest pain in the neck in our tribe of girls. Some would say it was only natural: that's what comes of being number two.

These days, I tell my granddaughters that, from the age of four, my unruly behavior earned me time in the cellar. I think I came out of those gloomy places without having given in, but I wouldn't swear to it. They feel terribly sorry for me. Poor Grandma!... Still, all these years later, although I find it very hard to go down into cellars, I've kept my strong will. Without it, I could never have overcome all the obstacles in my path, nor, probably, seized the opportunities that came my way.

A few years later, I started at St. Jacques School in Paris at the same time as my older sister, which gave me a lovely head start. I stayed ahead in school thanks to devoted teachers, strict but fair, who encouraged me and made me want to do well... and taught me to enjoy it. Alongside the subjects everyone studied, girls also learned sewing, embroidery... We were being trained to run a household... In those days, the women's revolt and May '68 were still a long way off. Given my social background, I was destined to marry a senior civil servant, preferably a military officer who would rise to become, at the very least, head of the armed forces. I defied the statistics.

Papa the Colonel had ambitions for his second daughter: she would enter Polytechnique, the prestigious school that had just opened its doors to girls. So, having begun Latin and Greek, I changed course: math. A dreadful MISTAKE... I would not live up to his expectations.

In 1954, the winter that broke every record for cold, the year Abbé Pierre appealed through the media for help for the poor and the “homeless,” the Mondran family was in Mont-de-Marsan. We spent four years at the Villa des Gêraniums on a very quiet dead-end street. That was where I learned to run on stilts. The house is now home to a couple with three young children. They were kind enough to welcome me in, and I was deeply moved to see, sixty years later, the bedroom where I had been so cold during the winter of 1954. There was no heating oil, so there was no heat, and the many brown army blankets weighed me down, numbing my limbs instead of warming them. Later, we moved onto the flight test base, into a chalet beside the fire station, just steps from the runway. The first picture I took with my Kodak box camera was of a Nord 2501, “La Grise.” I would keep it for years, moving it from one school assignment book to the next.

I loved the deafening roar of the airplanes. I loved watching them. I spent hours sitting beside the runway, watching those great birds take off and land. They set me dreaming. Yet I never thought of becoming a pilot, all because of math, which I didn’t like and which didn’t like me. Papa the Colonel would have liked me to go into that profession. His mother had forbidden him to do so, and I always thought he had been unhappy about it.

When I talked about becoming a flight attendant, the others imagined themselves as firefighters, teachers, hairdressers... One student, who later became mayor of Bordeaux, had ambitions to become president of Europe. That brilliant student went on to have a distinguished political career, but he has not reached the goal he set himself. Not yet, anyway?

We spent nine years on the Mont-de-Marsan base, including three with our mother looking after us on her own, since Papa the Colonel had been sent to Algeria, to Telergma, a few kilometers southwest of Constantine. Life for the three sisters revolved around school and bicycle rides, morning, noon, and evening, sixteen kilometers a day. The mailman’s rounds were central to our lives: every day he brought our mother a letter from Algeria, and every week, a letter from my aunt Michèle. Summer vacations were always spent in Soulac-sur-Mer, in the Gironde, at our maternal grandmother’s villa. There I would be reunited with my

cousins, a boy and a girl. We also stayed in Airvault, in the Deux-Sèvres, with my father's eldest sister, who taught me to do things well, very well, and never to sit idle.

My aunt, whom we called Tante Marraine, was my older sister's god-mother. She spent a great deal of time looking after me, the rebel. She had married late in life, to the widower she loved. Her mother hadn't thought him suitable. Tante Marraine waited until her mother had died before getting married. By then she was forty-seven, and she had no children. She certainly had a will of her own. We often clashed; I never won a single one of those battles.

In 1952, Maman was in the Jura with my sister Catherine, who had a lung condition. They had found a room on a farm, above the cattle stall. Their only heating came from the warmth given off by the cows on the ground floor. They fetched their water from the well.

My sister Frédérique was in Mamy Lulu's care in Paris.

I spent several months in Airvault.

The bowl of milk with a skin on top turned my stomach, but I had to drink it and get to school on time. I sat at the end of the kitchen table, watching the clock tick away the minutes. St. Agnès School was right beside the house; if I ran, I could get there in less than a minute. I would gulp down my milk at the very last moment I had allowed myself.

In July, we would set off early for "Les Rivières," the vegetable garden beside the Thouet, about three kilometers from the house. I was forbidden to pick green beans that were still too small or knock off the white flowers that would turn into beans a few days later.

Once the picking was done, we had to walk all the way back. I was barely six, and the little basket on my arm, full of green beans, was heavy. The sun was already hot, making the walk a struggle.

After lunch, a nap was compulsory. Before our afternoon snack, Marraine and I would sit at the kitchen table to trim the green beans.

I was never allowed to play with the porcelain-headed doll kept in the wardrobe. I was allowed to look at her in her original box with her clothes. I wasn't allowed to work the dollhouse elevator, either. Those beautiful old toys were given to me much later. After my granddaughters

failed to treat them with care, I had them restored, and I keep them as mementos.

One summer afternoon, we set off for Le Clos, the orchard outside the village, to pick plums. That walk led to a scene that still makes me blush when I remember how mean I was that day. On the way home, the baskets will be heavy with fruit, and my aunt will have her hands full. Even so, she agrees to let me bring my doll carriage. I trot along on my little five-year-old legs. I'm hot. I take off my cardigan and hold it out to my aunt. She lays it over the baby's feet. My baby will be too hot, too. I demand that she carry it, but she refuses to give in to my whim. I slow down. She walks ahead of me. At that moment, I speed up and ram my doll carriage into her legs. A wheel strikes her ankle. I had hurt her badly.

Tante Marraine left us at 101. She had forgiven me.

The three little girls were dressed alike. I think we had to wear the family uniform until we were fifteen. So my sister Catherine, the eldest, had the privilege of being the first to leave it behind.

Our mother made our clothes with the help of a seamstress who would spend an entire day working at the kitchen table. By evening, there were threads everywhere, which irritated our father no end. Maman also knitted our cardigans: three backs, six fronts, and six sleeves... By the time they were finished, the color and style were no longer to my taste.

Our mother was an accomplished homemaker. She raised us to lead lives just like hers. When we came home from school, she was there for our afternoon snack; there was no sneaking a second lump of sugar or piece of chocolate to go with our bread. She supervised our homework and had all three of her daughters recite their lessons.

We had to learn those lessons in our separate bedrooms, from which we were released at dinnertime, set at 7:30 p.m. We had better know them if we wanted to avoid going without dinner.

Learning my lessons was not one of my favorite activities. Having to recite them was an ordeal.

If I had put off going over my lessons, I risked being sent back to my room with a glass of water and a slice of bread.

I was a plump little girl: here was a chance to go on a diet. I grumbled bitterly if I was deprived of tomatoes with stuffing, my favorite dish. I was

delighted whenever soup was on the menu.

I would have liked to go over my lessons with my mother. But I wasn't an only child, and even if she had devoted all her time to us, there wouldn't have been enough to go around.

She also listened to our stories about school and comforted us through our little everyday troubles.

Above all, she kept the peace among the three sisters, who, like children everywhere, squabbled over nothing. Apparently, girls are worse than boys in that respect.

She shopped at the market every Saturday. I loved going with her. The market was such a cheerful place, filled with the delicious scent of herbs.

The fruit and vegetable vendors, poultry sellers, and cheesemongers traded jokes. The fishmonger shouted the loudest to attract customers. I tugged at our mother's sleeve to keep her from stopping at his stall. I didn't like fish because of the bones.

The tomatoes and potatoes weren't round and uniform in size, like those in supermarkets today. They were often misshapen and blemished. The fruit was beautifully golden, so sweet that the lady bees sometimes helped themselves to a nibble. Those imperfections never kept us from enjoying every bite.

Today, I find those old familiar flavors in the fruits and vegetables I grow with a little horse manure for fertilizer, no pesticides, and plenty of love.

We usually arrived as the market was winding down and the vendors were beginning to pack up their goods. Their prices were better then. Sometimes they would give us twice as much for the same price. What a bargain!

Every Sunday at noon, we had chicken and fries. The best meal of the week. The chicken was free-range, its thigh meat firm to the bite, proof that it had run through the Landes forest.

Our mother put it in the oven around eleven, before we left for Mass, which the chaplain celebrated in the chapel on the base. It was a simple wooden hut, poorly insulated and barely heated.

Our father, who held the purse strings, gave our mother the house-keeping money. If she needed anything beyond the daily groceries, school

supplies or fabric to make skirts, for instance, she would gently tell him that he hadn't given her enough.

I felt sad for her. I remember feeling guilty whenever she needed to ask for more because of something I needed.

Very early on, I came to see women's financial independence as both a practical necessity and a moral imperative.

Our mother never received any proper presents. Everything was for us.

Our father managed the family budget on his own. He did the best he could, but his military pay was meager in those days. In a serviceman's eyes, the pride of serving his country made up for the poor pay. May '68 would improve our circumstances by bringing an increase in military pay.

And so, when our father died, Maman had to learn to write a check.

Our mother had selflessly given up nursing to raise her three daughters and meet the obligations that came with our father's position.

She had to organize and serve dinners for the base colonel and other local dignitaries.

From a very young age, I was happy to help. I helped her set the table. The plates, glasses, and silverware had to be arranged impeccably, following the same rules as the finest restaurants.

When the guests arrived, the three little girls had to greet each one and then quietly withdraw. I was only nine when I began going into the kitchen to help. My first attempt earned me no praise: the slices of roast weren't all the same thickness! So I washed the dishes. I took the greatest care not to break a crystal glass or a Limoges porcelain plate.

At one of these dinners, on April 20, 1955, my parents entertained Commandant Xavier de Chérade de Montbron, a test pilot at the Centre d'Expériences aériennes militaires. The next day, April 21, my birthday, he was killed while returning from a test flight in a Vampire X-4476. He was thirty-eight. I couldn't make sense of it. A young man had died in one of those airplanes that filled my dreams. He was the first of my parents' guests I had taken a liking to, and I would never see him again. I was very sad.

I lost my paternal grandfather when I was four. "He had gone to heaven, and I would never see him again." I was too young to attend his funeral. Two years later, my grandmother, his wife, died too. At seven, you're a

big girl: you're expected to kiss your grandmother as she lies on her deathbed and attend her funeral. I did both with courage and dignity.

My paternal grandparents met in Airvault, at the hotel Le Chêne Vert, which my grandmother ran, a responsibility passed down from mother to daughter. The hotel stands in a large courtyard opposite the main house and the stables. In the old days, guests came to the hotel in horse-drawn carts. My grandfather had come from his native Béarn to bring electricity to the town.

I never knew the hotel when it was still in business. Today, my sister Catherine has restored it and divided it into rental apartments. Her daughter lives in the house with her whole little family.

My grandparents later ran the hardware store on the square, opposite the covered market and the abbey church of St-Pierre.

The three sisters were closely watched whenever they took it into their heads to play shopkeeper. There was to be no mixing up the nails, screws, and nuts of different sizes, all neatly sorted into little wooden compartments...

When "La Quincaille" was sold to a butcher, our aunt Marraine didn't keep the furniture. She took only a few of the storage boxes, which the three sisters divided among themselves.

It was in St-Pierre Church that I was baptized by the Most Reverend Father Dom Anselme Chibas-Lassalle, "Tonton Jean-Baptiste." He was a very kind man. We were deeply fond of each other.

After studying at Saint-Léon in Pau, "Tonton Jean-Baptiste" entered the novitiate at Belloc. He took his monastic vows, which initially meant exile. The monastic foundation in Palestine needed workers. He was among the first to volunteer. The École Saint-Étienne in Jerusalem counted him among its best students. Under the guidance of renowned teachers, he devoted himself enthusiastically to sacred studies and might have gained extensive expertise had the Syrian Seminary not called on him to serve.

For many years, he carried out the humble duties of teaching without neglecting the scholarly work that would make him a recognized authority in the Eastern Churches.

The war of 1914 called him back to France and left the work in Palestine in ruins. At the Armistice, the question arose of starting again. Everything had to be rebuilt... And everything was rebuilt. Father Anselme was appointed superior and was kept in that position thereafter.

He brought a community back together, increased the number of students, and guided a generation of priests to ordination. Through his efforts, a clergy was trained that brought honor and strength to the Syriac rite. In recognition of his service, the Patriarch conferred on Father Anselme the title of chorepiscopus¹, Rome granted him the dignity of abbot, and the French government awarded him the Légion d'Honneur. His life came to an end in 1958, in simplicity and peace, at Belloc Abbey.

The photographs in the family album show that, on the day of my baptism, I didn't like the holy water "Tonton Jean-Baptiste" poured over my head. My godfather, Jean-Claude, tells me that I cried a great deal and that he had a very hard time holding me over the baptismal font. Though I was only six months old, I put up a fight.

It was also in St-Pierre Church that I said my final goodbye to my parents before accompanying each of them, in turn, to the cemetery in Airvault, beside a sawmill. Our father wanted to be buried in his hometown. Our mother didn't like that cemetery. She said that with the noise of logs being sawed, construction equipment sounding its warning signals, and trucks coming and going, no one could rest in peace. Yet she joined our father in the family vault, as she had wished.

My parents met in Airvault. Life in Paris during the war was difficult, and our mother and her sisters were welcomed by Parrain Olive, Marraine Octavie, and their daughter Régine in Barroux, a small village in the Deux-Sèvres a few kilometers from Airvault. The farm offered little comfort, but our mother had happy memories of those rustic stays and of helping with the various farm chores.

I never thanked our mother for all the love she gave us, for devoting all her time to us, and for her patience, especially with me. I certainly put her through her paces!

I can also thank our father for shaping my character.

Our father also made sure his offspring received a good education.

Before dinner came a compulsory ritual: mental arithmetic practice. I was quick, and I enjoyed it. Made obsolete by calculators, mental arithmetic is making a comeback today... Himalaya, our granddaughter, who excels at math, is discovering mental arithmetic in eighth grade and losing points over it. She didn't follow my advice and tells me sadly, "I should have listened to you."

I was fourteen when I must have made Papa the Colonel terribly angry by standing up to him. It wasn't the first time.

At barely four, I was living in Germany. Soup wasn't my favorite dish. I was sitting at the table beside our father. Our mother often scolded him for adding salt before he had even tasted his food, yet he always gave the saltshaker a generous shake. In my little head, I imagine that salt might make the soup taste better. I ask for some, but my father refuses.

That incident is etched in my memory.

Since I wouldn't give in, I was taken down to the cellar with my bowl of soup. It was dimly lit. The door was locked. I didn't cry. I waited. Our mother, worried, came to see me. I hadn't touched the soup, so she left again.

Silence had settled on the other side of the door. Dinner was over, the table cleared.

Bedtime was approaching. I didn't get to bed until three hours later, still on an empty stomach.

I had just passed the strong-will test with flying colors!

Ten years later, my father was determined not to let a little girl stand up to him again, a man who kept his "grunts" in line.

He delivered his verdict and prediction:

"You're stupid, you're ugly, you won't even be able to tend geese, and you'll never find a husband."

There had to be a reason for all this. My disastrous grades could account for "stupid" and "incapable of tending geese." As for "ugly," I had decided, without telling anyone, to have my hair cropped to two centimeters. Goodbye to the tight curls that made my mop so difficult to manage. The result was, of course, a disaster.

"You'll never find a husband" would have to wait. Later, I would receive two marriage proposals on the same day... My father's prophecy

would prove wrong. That did nothing to restore my self-confidence, though.

Many years later, as he lay in his hospital bed just moments before dying, he said to me, "I love you so much, my little Gete. I'm entrusting your mother to you." Only then did the pain of his humiliating words begin to ease. Still, the wound they left had affected more than thirty years of my life.

Twice a year, our maternal grandmother, Lucienne, whom we called Mamy Lulu, came to visit. She was of Polish descent through her grandfather, who arrived in Poitiers in 1863. Before allowing him to practice medicine, France, his adopted country, required him to retake his qualifying exams, in Latin, if you please, because he spoke no French. Our maternal grandfather was stationmaster at the Gare d'Austerlitz. He died in 1944 at the age of fifty-four. After she was widowed, Mamy Lulu raised her four daughters in a large apartment on Boulevard Saint-Michel in Paris.

Our parents lived with her for a while. Our father deserved a good deal of credit for living with so many women: his wife, his mother-in-law, his three sisters-in-law, and his two daughters.

I took my first steps in the Luxembourg Gardens. I must have been eighteen months old! I was no early bloomer. Seventy years ago, parents probably paid less attention than they do today to their little darlings' development. These days, they're walking at ten or twelve months!

During her stays with us, Mamy Lulu told us stories about the little tricolor duck. Every evening, she sent him off on new adventures. We couldn't get enough of them. That little duck was fearless and full of imagination.

I have long since forgotten the little tricolor duck's adventures. No trace of them remains. What a shame! We should have written them down.

Perhaps that nameless little duck gave me my taste for adventure!

Mamy Lulu also reported on the academic achievements of my cousin Pierre Alain, who was my age and, at the time, the family's only grandson, the brainy one... He was playing bridge by the age of six, and between thirteen and fifteen he must have been reading SARTRE and

Simone de BEAUVOIR, authors forbidden in conventional lower-middle-class households. Meanwhile, I occupied myself as girls did in the late 1950s: playing with dolls, learning to cook and keep house...

I'm not the only one in the family who suspects that Mamy Lulu enjoyed passing along information she knew would irritate her listeners, sometimes distorting it for that very purpose.

I had already heard it all from my mother, who exchanged weekly letters with her younger sister, my cousin's mother. Unlike Madame de Sévigné's letters, those of the two Pineau ladies were never collected or published. This disregard for future generations no doubt helped inspire my decision to write down my memories.

Depending on my mood, I was called "Gete," my usual nickname, "Black Sheep" when my expression grew as dark as my hair, or "Princess Cactus" when no one could say a word to me without getting a prickly reply.

It was Uncle Pierre, the father of my "twin" cousin, who came up with those last two nicknames, which naturally stuck.

My childhood and early adolescence passed without any major upheaval.

Then again... My little girl's heart began to flutter when I was ten. I was very much in love with a boy my age, very cute and always smartly dressed. He was the son of a military pilot, and our parents were friends.

For my eighteenth birthday, my parents let me invite a few friends over to celebrate, girls and boys! We had the living room and the record player for dancing. They weren't leaving us the house to ourselves. From their bedroom, they would keep an eye on the party.

By then, my heart has been beating for my beloved for eight years. He's among the guests.

He asks me for the first dance. He has good manners. He owes that much to his hostess.

And then, nothing! For every dance after that, one of my friends was his only partner. A few years later, they married. All my hopes went out the window. I never saw him again.

It took me a long time to get over him.

I would have loved to play the piano. My parents refused to have one in the house. Was it because there wasn't enough room, because of the expense, or because they didn't want to put up with a beginner's wrong notes? I have no idea.

The teacher was reluctant to give me lessons if I couldn't practice at home. I rarely got to put my fingers on a keyboard. Yet I took music theory classes for more than five years. I deserved some credit for persevering, but even my faithful attendance never persuaded my parents to provide me with a piano.

I wasn't interested in sports. But for a chance to get out of the house, I occasionally agreed to hit a tennis ball around on the base court with the sons of servicemen.

At school, my conduct grades were the only truly respectable ones: regularly 19s and 20s. The little Mondran girls were well brought up!

My sewing grades were also very good. I should have been steered toward a vocational lycée, a LEP, to study sewing!

From seconde, or tenth grade, onward, school was hell. My dislike of school stemmed largely from a lack of motivation, and I can't help thinking that motivating students should be a teacher's first priority.

When teachers knew how to capture my attention, I could be the best in the class. But if I didn't admire them, I didn't listen. I had no motivation, and my grades were mediocre, barely enough to move on to the next grade.

When we lived at Cazaux, a French Air Force base near Arcachon, I was mistakenly given a BCG booster at school. The person giving the shots refused to listen when I said I wasn't supposed to have the booster; I didn't have the paperwork to prove it. It caused recurring health problems and severe, very severe weight loss.

I was out of school for more than a year, and I loved that time, when everyone fussed over me. Although I diligently followed correspondence courses throughout, returning to the lycée wasn't easy. I had lost my connection to school.

When I was in Math Elem, the equivalent of the science track known today as section S, the week began with two hours of math. The class was mostly boys. The teacher loved soccer, and the boys would get him talk-

ing about the latest game. To make up for the time he spent discussing it, he would suddenly race through the lesson. I rarely tuned in, having little affinity for either the teacher or math.

I failed my baccalauréat. Hardly surprising, with math carrying a weighting of seven. Repeating the year was unthinkable. There was no way I was spending another year sitting in a lycée classroom, bored out of my mind. I decided to put an end to those dreary years of collège and lycée.

I had some thinking to do.

“No big deal,” I told myself. I knew how to READ, WRITE, and DO ARITHMETIC, and I had been well brought up. I had coasted through childhood, and my batteries were fully charged. If I set my mind to it, anything was possible. I was convinced of that. My sister Catherine recently reminded me of what I used to say over and over to our parents, who were growing rather desperate over my nonchalance: “Leave me alone. You’ll see, once I get going, you won’t be able to stop me.” I kept my word.

When I failed my baccalauréat, we were living in Le Blanc, in the Indre département. Papa the Colonel ran the French Air Force depot. We were still living on a base, behind tall gray walls. The little garden gate that opened onto the street was guarded by a sentry with a gun and a dog. It was the only way out.

I had a view of the sky. So I spent a lot of time looking at it... Until one day... I was sunbathing in my underwear, wearing nothing but a bra and panties, in the asphalt yard behind the house. A large white bird appeared, silent. It circled and circled... A glider.

I jumped on my bicycle and set off for the airfield three kilometers away, getting a tow from my older sister on her VéloSoleX so I could get there faster. I wasn’t yet “cleared” to ride a VéloSoleX.

When we reached the airfield, the glider had already landed and was sitting in front of the hangar. Its pilot had gone.

I returned to the airfield several times and got to know the pilot who had entered my airspace without Papa the Colonel’s permission.

He explained that the normal landing procedure called for flying over the depot. Now that I know how to read a VAC chart, a visual approach

chart showing the airfield's traffic patterns, I think he was feeding me a line.

He later told me it was the only way he could see me behind those tall walls without having to go through the secondary guard post. Remember, I was guarded by a sentry with a gun and a dog, enough to put an end to any attempt at flirting.

One day Bertrand, the pilot's friend, had said to him, "Come on, let's go see the colonel's daughter when she gets out of the lycée. You'll see, she's pretty cute." "Just a kid," the pilot had said after that first glimpse. Then he had gone back to the airfield, where he spent all his time, much to the dismay of his parents, who would have liked him to put some effort into their insurance and real estate agency so he could eventually take it over.

And yet he wanted to see that girl again, very much so. And the simplest way for him, what could be more natural for a pilot, was by air...

On June 19, 1966, the club held an air show. Le Blanc is a small town, and the show drew a large crowd. It proved a great success despite the threatening weather. The pilot's father, through whom insurance had been arranged, kept checking the rain gauge throughout the show to make sure the duration of the showers did not jeopardize the coverage.

Papa the Colonel and his family were among the official guests. The club certainly owed its generous benefactor an invitation, considering all the liters of fuel supplied for training glider pilots and... the rib steaks spirited out of the mess hall stores by a military student pilot for the club's barbecues.

I have several vivid memories of that day, which would prove a turning point in my life.

The first is the thrill I felt watching a glider perform aerobatics. Or was it the pilot who impressed me most? At that very moment, I decided to see off all my rivals.

The second, more of an anecdote, concerns the first glider flight taken, against "my pilot's" advice, by the representative of the Châteauroux Prefecture. He was a young man in a navy suit, a white shirt, a somber tie, and well-polished shoes, the uniform of senior civil servants. He was an ENA graduate... "If you get sick, I won't stop on your account." The