

La Comédiathèque

Short Stories



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comediatheque.net

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by Jean-Pierre Martinez

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1 - A FAMILIAR FACE

It was my last appointment of the day. When I spotted him in the waiting room of my office, I didn't recognise him immediately. He was wearing dark glasses, and a scarf was covering half of his face. At first, I thought he was a burn victim, trying to hide his disfigured face that way. In my clinic, I see this kind of unfortunate people every day, to whom I strive to help. I am a plastic surgeon. And I pride myself on being one of the best specialists in Paris when it comes to reconstructive facial surgery. Of course, because one has to make a living, I also take care of rectifying, enhancing or rejuvenating the natural features of perfectly healthy patients, but who wish to better conform to the beauty standards imposed by magazines. A much more lucrative niche, mainly targeting a female audience. Rightly or wrongly, men feel much less inclined than women to change their appearance. Unless, of course, exceptional circumstances arise...

So it was only when he sat in front of me in my office and removed his glasses and scarf that I recognised him. His face was perfectly intact, and he appeared strangely familiar to me. Alfred Charlant! A few weeks earlier, the picture of this man, hitherto little known to the general public, was on the front page of all the newspapers. This high-ranking official with a checkered past had been convicted in a dark affair of large-scale embezzlement of public funds. Since then, he had been on the run, and everyone believed he was already hiding under a false identity in a tax haven that was not very concerned about the morality of its guests, as long as their bank accounts were well provided for. Apparently, the man, under a European arrest warrant, had not dared to take the risk of being recognised at the airport while trying to leave the country. When you have such a media face, fake papers are not enough to hope to go unnoticed. This is one of the few disadvantages of celebrity...

"I want to change my face", the man declared without further preamble. Although his request didn't surprise me given the delicate situation he was in, it took me a moment to respond. "I can't do that, you know it very well. I would be guilty of complicity in helping you escape the police..." The man didn't seem at all unsettled. "You're going to do it anyway," he asserted without flinching. His confidence chilled me to the bone. Obviously, he wasn't joking. "And why should I do you this favour?" I asked, my voice slightly trembling. "Because some friends of mine are holding your son hostage," he replied. "They won't release him until I leave the country. And with my new passport, featuring the brand new face you'll sculpt with your artist's hand." He smirked. "I'll leave the details up to you, Doctor. But while you're at it, make me more handsome to start my new life. I've always dreamed of having the face of a tango dancer. I want to be your masterpiece..."

I have no choice," I said to myself, and after verifying over the phone with my wife that Alfred Charlant's threats were not a bluff, I had to proceed with the operation that same night. I was caught off guard. Usually, my patients only want to improve a few details here and there, while getting rid of their most blatant flaws. Their goal is not to wake up with an entirely different face, to the point that their own mothers wouldn't recognise them. So I needed a model. In my haste, I found inspiration for the face of the Latin playboy my Machiavellian client seemed to desire by flipping through a magazine in the waiting room of my office. I presented him with the cut-out photo from the magazine, and having received his approval, the operation began. It lasted almost all night, but by morning, despite the bandages that still hid Alfred Charlant's new face, I knew I had achieved my masterpiece.

After a few days of recovery, an accomplice brought him a brand new fake passport, complete with the photo of his new face, and Alfred Charlant left my clinic incognito heading towards the airport. "As soon as I've boarded, someone will let you know by phone where you can find your son," he said. To his credit, I must admit that the man kept his word.

The end of the story was revealed in the next issue of the same magazine where I had cut out the photo for Alfred Charlant's new face. As soon as he arrived at his destination, which I had guessed to be South America since he wanted to have the face of a Latin lover to blend in more easily with the crowd, he was immediately apprehended by border police. He was surprised by this. With his new identity, he was convinced he could go unnoticed. He protested, claiming it was a case of mistaken identity and to try to convince the police to let him go, he admitted to having undergone a minor plastic surgery. He argued that this was not a crime and claimed his innocence. Perhaps that was why he was being mistaken for someone else...

The policeman who handcuffed him put an end to his hopes of a golden retirement with an ironic tone: "A plastic surgery operation! Well, that's a new one... Next time you change your face, avoid getting the looks of a drug dealer wanted by every police force in America...". The policeman, laughing, turned to his colleagues. "Come on, let's take him away. It's Pedro Semprini. We've been trying to catch him for years. And he hoped to slip through our fingers by only changing his name on his passport."

To keep a memory of this adventure, I carefully glued the photo back in the magazine where I had cut it out. It was accompanying an article announcing a reward for the head of one of the biggest drug traffickers in Colombia.

2 – THE REAL ESTATE

When Marc showed me this advertisement he found in our mailbox, I wasn't very excited. Buying a house on a life annuity basis was like betting on death. I felt it could only bring us trouble. And I had already had enough trouble in the past... Not to mention that this lady could very well become a centenarian! She wasn't that old... Marc, my husband, saw things more serenely. As a doctor, he predicted at first glance that our landlord wouldn't live much longer.

Despite my reservations, I eventually gave in. A real house in the heart of Paris, with a garden! It was a dream we thought was out of reach. Especially since the surge in real estate prices... The contract we made with the landlord seemed advantageous. She would occupy two independent rooms directly overlooking the garden, and would leave us the usufruct of the rest of the house. In exchange for a small lump sum and a lifetime annuity that, in the end, would cost us less than a 20 or 30-year mortgage...

We had no reason to be too eager for this kind lady to disappear. Even if, obviously, we would only truly be at home after her death. Fortunately, Monique, the lady in question, was very discreet. As soon as we moved in, my husband naturally became her treating physician. She suffered from various ailments associated with her age, but nothing serious. At least apparently... For the rest, unfortunately, we had little time to get to know her. A few days after our arrival in the house, the cleaning lady found her dead in her bed...

This death was in itself a strictly financial windfall, since my husband and I became owners of an exceptional property for a pittance in less than a week. But I did not have the heart to rejoice. I suspected that this bargain would attract attention...

And that's exactly what happened. Three days after Monique's death, we were called to the police station to answer a few questions. Although I had a sinister presentiment, I tried to remain calm. Given the context of this disappearance, these suspicions were perfectly legitimate.

Unfortunately, what we learned from the inspector who received us did not reassure us. The autopsy had just revealed that the old lady's death was not due to natural causes. She had succumbed to an overdose of morphine. My husband readily admitted to being Monique's last treating doctor but denied giving her the fatal injection.

Marc's protestations of innocence, unfortunately, were in vain. This dignified old lady was not, a priori, a drug addict. It was therefore unlikely that she had succumbed to an overdose by injecting herself with morphine. Nor was it clear why she would have committed suicide by such a strange means just days after selling her house on a life annuity basis...

Her doctor, on the other hand, could easily have obtained morphine and administered a lethal dose under some pretext. A flu vaccination, for example, since it was the season. As for medical error, warned the inspector, it would be difficult to plead... since the very timely death of this patient allowed her doctor to escape the lifetime annuity he had agreed to pay her...

After paying a hefty bail, I was released under judicial supervision. But Marc would remain incarcerated until his trial, which did not bode well... In the meantime, I was allowed to keep the house. It was not the best decision I made. Being alone in this sinister house, the cause of my misfortune, precipitated my downfall. I came to doubt my husband's innocence myself. I fell into a deep depression and started drinking...

Since my accident, eight years ago, my health, especially my mental health, had remained fragile. This second setback was on the verge of destroying me. Why was fate so cruel to me? At the time, behind the wheel of my car, I had caused the death of a man... Thanks to my lawyer's skill, I had managed to avoid a conviction. But I still felt guilty about the tragedy...

Deprived of the comforting presence of my husband, I thought back to the man whom, through my carelessness, I had also taken away from his family, and I decided to go and pay my respects at his grave. I had only been there once, upon my release from the hospital. During the trial, which I did not have the courage to attend, I was still in intensive care... It was at the hospital that I had met Marc, still an intern at the time, and who had taken such good care of me...

Upon arriving at the cemetery, I easily found the spot where the man I had accidentally taken the life of was buried. It was a family tomb. I immediately noticed that another name had recently been added to the tombstone. The wife of my victim had joined him in the afterlife. Had she died of grief, as I might die myself if Marc was sentenced to life imprisonment for a murder he did not commit?

Suddenly, my blood ran cold. Next to the name of this woman was a photo in a locket. I immediately recognised her. It was the woman who had sold us her house! She had not presented herself to us under the name engraved in marble, but she could have easily taken back her maiden name to throw us off the trail...

That's when I understood. I had taken Monique's husband away from her. Through this suicide disguised as murder, she was taking mine away from me. She had avenged herself against me. Like her, I was condemned to live alone, like a widow, in this sinister house where she herself had mourned the husband I had deprived her of...

3 – FAKE SELF-DEFENSE

Antoine had always suffered from an almost pathological shyness, perhaps because of his small size and somewhat frail physique. He so wished he could possess the quiet confidence that his friend Vincent had, which girls of his age found so appealing. It's not that he thought he was a coward! He just hadn't had many opportunities to demonstrate his courage. And the inferiority complex that gnawed at him prevented him from establishing normal relationships with the women around him. And more if affinity...

So, when Antoine met Jade a few weeks earlier at a party at Vincent's, he had decided to do everything he could to seduce her. Vincent hadn't been able to give Antoine many details about this beautiful young Asian girl, rather reserved, invited by a friend of a friend. Fortunately, however, Antoine's discreet, if not somewhat effaced, character didn't seem to bother Jade too much. For a good part of the evening, he had talked to her about the thesis he was preparing at his film school on the golden age of American westerns. She had politely listened and, emboldened by his success, he had even dared to invite her to the cinema...

But Antoine feared that this initial success would be short-lived... Despite his intellectual interest in westerns, he was no cowboy, he knew it. Would the beautiful Jade really be seduced by a boy with such an unmanly appearance?

Antoine confided his fears to his friend Vincent, whom he was supposed to meet before his cinema date with Jade. If only he had the opportunity to show this girl what he was capable of... Vincent listened and tried to reassure him. He knew that Antoine, despite his shyness and slightly effeminate appearance, was anything but timid when faced with real danger. Vincent had already had the opportunity to see this when one evening, in the metro corridors, Antoine managed to put to flight, through his determination alone, two thugs who intended to extort money from his friend. Vincent was very grateful for what Antoine had done for him that night, instead of prudently staying away. But would Jade, who barely knew Antoine, be able to detect this hidden strength of character in him?

A few hours later, Antoine, more nervous than ever, met Jade in front of the cinema. He greeted her with an embarrassed air, not even daring to give her a kiss on the cheek, before going to get the tickets. As Jade seemed as embarrassed as he was, they hardly exchanged any words before the lights went out and the movie started. Fortunately, Antoine had already seen this great Western classic three times, because he had a hard time concentrating throughout the entire screening. He dreamed of only one thing: taking Jade's hand, which was just a few centimetres away from his on the armrest. But he didn't have that kind of courage...

When the lights came back on, they exchanged an embarrassed glance and left the room in silence. Antoine still suggested to Jade that he could walk her to the

metro. When they arrived in front of the entrance, on this almost deserted street at this late hour, Antoine did not immediately notice the presence of a man, back turned, leaning in the darkness on the balustrade. It was only when he was about to turn on his heels after saying goodbye, and probably farewell, to the shy Jade that Antoine saw the face of the stranger, who had just turned towards the young girl. Antoine saw that the individual was wearing a hood. Which didn't bode well... Indeed, the man's voice, distorted by the fact that he was speaking through his hood, ordered Jade to give him the money she had on her...

Without hesitation, Antoine immediately turned back with the firm intention of intervening. At least this misadventure would allow him to show the beautiful Asian girl that he was not a coward. Even if he had to lose one or two teeth, he would not let anyone hurt Jade. But Antoine didn't have time to intervene. To his great surprise, instead of panicking, the frail Jade delivered a lightning kick to her attacker's chin, sending him straight to the ground. The ground, in this case, was made of hard pavement that was not very good at cushioning the blow. The thug's head hit the ground heavily, and he lay there unconscious.

Antoine was momentarily frozen. More than the unexpected attack, it was Jade's surprising reaction that stunned him. The timid girl explained herself in a word. "I'm a black belt in karate," she said in her small voice. "But I didn't want to hurt him...". Clearly more self-assured than she appeared, Jade leaned over the hooded figure to examine him. "He's breathing normally, but he's unconscious," she diagnosed. "It's better not to touch him, in case he has a skull fracture. His head may have hit the curb... You can call the ambulance... and the police?". Antoine nodded incoherently and dialled the first number on his phone. Jade seemed so determined... Clearly, he wouldn't be able to play the hero today...

A few minutes later, they heard a siren getting closer. It was then that the stranger, regaining consciousness, raised his head and removed his own hood, which was preventing him from breathing properly. Antoine and Jade then widened their eyes in recognition of Vincent, whom they had met for the first time at his place! Fortunately unharmed, Vincent rubbed his head and let out a painful sigh. "Damn, I didn't know you did karate," he said to Jade. Jade, on the other hand, cast a suspicious glance at Antoine. "So it was a little setup to impress me, wasn't it?" Antoine, who was clearly confused, protested incoherently. Vincent came to his aid. He swore that Antoine had no idea what was going on. "I just did it to help him," he explained, embarrassed. "I thought I'd whisper something in his ear when he intervened, and then I'd run away..."

"Help him? Well, you've succeeded," replied Jade as the fire truck, followed closely by a police car, pulled up next to them. "Now we'll have to explain all this at the police station..."

4 – BLOOD WEDDING

Behind the wheel of her car, Sandra climbed the last few kilometres of the winding road that led to the villa where she hoped to find her lover. Her heart was pounding. Despite Charles' formal prohibition, she couldn't resist the temptation to go and see him at his home. Or rather, at his wife's home, since the beautiful property located on the heights of Cannes belonged to the rich widow whom he had married, he said, only for her money.

It had been more than a week since Sandra had seen the man she loved. For months, Charles had promised to leave his wife. At their last meeting, he had sworn that this time it was soon. In the meantime, Sandra had to be reasonable and not try to contact him. But Sandra, the neglected mistress, wounded in her pride, could no longer wait. He didn't even take her calls anymore! And if it was her that he wanted to get rid of by keeping her away? She had to find out for sure.

Arriving at the parking lot on the roadside in front of the villa, Sandra realised with disappointment that Charles' car was not there. She had hoped to find him alone at home... She did, however, see his wife's sports coupe, parked in the shade of an umbrella pine. Sandra first had the reflex to turn around. She was afraid of the consequences of a tête-à-tête with this harpy whom she had never seen before. But fate intervened. As she was manoeuvring quickly to leave without being seen, Sandra heard a characteristic noise and, leaning out of the open window, saw that her front left tire was flat...

It was impossible to reverse the five kilometres of winding road she had just driven with a flat tire. As for changing a tire in this parking lot without attracting attention, that was out of the question. She had no choice but to confront her rival.

As the latter, walking along the pool, descended towards her to inquire about what was happening, Sandra felt invaded by a feeling of jealousy. Moulded in a high-end suit, with her blonde hair carefully pulled back into a bun, Chantal certainly looked a little severe, but she didn't lack class. Was this really the acrimonious woman Charles had depicted her to be?

"I'm not sure I know how to change a tire," Chantal apologised kindly. "And my husband is not here...". Gathering her courage, Sandra improvised. "Thank you, but I can manage on my own. If you allow me to use your parking lot...". Chantal smiled. "Make yourself at home. Besides, I was just about to leave. My husband is waiting for me at the restaurant." Chantal didn't notice Sandra's distress and continued in a tone of female complicity. "It's our wedding anniversary today...". Sandra made an effort to control herself. "Congratulations," she said coldly. Chantal was already walking away towards the villa.

Opening her car trunk, Sandra trembled with anger. So, that's how Charles was preparing to break up with his wife? She felt betrayed. Humiliated. She grabbed her jack with murderous desires, hesitating only on the choice of her victim. She opted for Charles. After all, poor Chantal had nothing to do with it. As for him, he had it coming...

To make matters worse, Sandra remembered, upon seeing the spare tire at the bottom of her trunk, that she had neglected to have it repaired after her last flat tire a few weeks earlier. She was about to burst into tears when a helpful hand landed on her shoulder. "Some days are just like that," Chantal murmured kindly with a compassionate look. Turning back, the elegant woman in her forties handed her a set of keys. "I'm not leaving for another fifteen minutes, just enough time to change my outfit. I'm afraid this ensemble is a bit dreary for a wedding anniversary... Take my car to go to the garage down the hill. They'll fix your tire in five minutes."

As she sped down the winding road to the garage in Chantal's sports coupe, Sandra was seething with anger. There was no doubt that if Charles had been in front of her on the side of the road, she would have gladly swerved to run him over!

The ringing of her mobile phone interrupted her thoughts of murder scenarios to get revenge on her lover. Grabbing the phone from her handbag, she answered in a sour tone, but softened as soon as she recognised the voice of her caller. It was him! He dared to call her back! Instead of exploding and telling him what had just happened, she decided to act as if nothing had happened. To see how far this traitor would go with his hypocrisy.

"So, have you left Chantal?" she asked. Strangely, this question didn't seem to throw him off. "A divorce would ruin me," he admitted. "But I found another way...". "Oh, really?" Sandra commented ironically. "And how do you plan to do it?" "I have a meeting with her in fifteen minutes," he said. "She should already be on the road...". He paused before continuing, as if to emphasise the gravity of what was about to happen. "I tampered with the brakes on her car," he finally said. "In a few seconds, she should crash at the bottom of a ravine, and I will finally be free..."

Sandra's face froze as she digested the information her lover had just given her. She swallowed hard before slowly pressing the pedal... The brakes didn't respond, and the tires of the sports coupe, speeding uncontrollably, were already biting into the edge of the abyss...

5 – PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

With his hands in his pockets, Jérôme strolled down Rue de la Gaîté towards Montparnasse, whistling a tune. The neighbourhood was still almost deserted at this early hour. Jérôme sat down at a café terrace and sighed with contentment. It was Sunday, the weather was beautiful, and he had the whole day ahead of him. The night before, he had accompanied Clara, his wife, to the taxi that was taking her to the airport. She had an important meeting in New York on Monday and, to prepare calmly and arrive in good shape, she had preferred to spend the weekend there. At that very moment, given the time difference, she must be asleep. She had promised to call her husband, but he was not really in a hurry to hear from her...

Of course, Jérôme loved his wife. But a little bit of freedom was not unwelcome either. That's why, as he savoured his coffee while watching a pretty girl passing by, he was startled, as if caught red-handed, by the ringing of a mobile phone. He instinctively took his out of his pocket, before realising that the sound was coming from elsewhere. He was, however, the only customer sitting at the terrace. He looked around and soon spotted the phone, abandoned on a chair.

Jérôme hesitated for a moment but, as the ringing became insistent, he decided to pick up the phone to answer the call. "Hello?" he stammered. It was a female voice that answered him, with a slight foreign accent. A confident but warm voice that unsettled him. In a few words, the young woman explained to him that she had lost her mobile phone, and she was calling to find out if, by chance, it had been found by someone kind enough to return it to her.

Jérôme smiled as he realised the benefit he could gain from this unexpected situation. He was alone in Paris and had no specific plans. Why not be a gentleman? He immediately offered to return the stranger's phone to her home. The voice seemed to hesitate for a second before accepting and giving him an address just a few streets away. The young woman added that it would take no more than fifteen minutes, unless their encounter lasted a little longer, thought Jérôme with a smile as he put the phone in his pocket.

As he made his way to the address, Jérôme, feeling excited, began to imagine different scenarios. It even crossed his mind that it might be a unique flirting strategy. What if the mysterious stranger was hiding somewhere, watching for single men who came to sit at this terrace? She lived just around the corner, and from her balcony, she could easily spy on what was happening on rue de la Gaîté... Jérôme laughed. He was probably delusional, but even so, it would be flattering to be chosen to fall into the trap of this praying mantis!

Arriving at number 13, Jérôme found that it was an artist's studio, which seemed like a good omen. He felt a little bohemian today... Nevertheless, he hesitated for a moment. What if that sensual voice belonged to a sexagenarian with an unattractive appearance? A monster even, who had no other way to lure men into her lair without having to show herself!

Shrugging, Jérôme firmly pressed the doorbell button. After all, he was only returning a lost phone to its owner, nothing more... Besides, the sight that greeted him when the door opened reassured him right away. And brought him back to his fantasies... Wrapped in a bathrobe, the young blonde woman who invited him in was anything but ugly. With her short hair and athletic body barely concealed by the terry cloth, she certainly had a sporty look. But it was impossible to mistake her for a boy. In that outfit, she reminded him more of an Olympic swimmer coming out of the water to step onto the highest step of the podium..

Upon entering, Jérôme realised that the presumed swimmer was actually an artist. The studio was cluttered with canvases, and an easel was standing in the middle of the room. To reassure his hostess of his intentions, Jérôme took out his phone from his pocket and handed it to her. In gratitude, she offered him some tea, which he eagerly accepted to delay his departure. He no longer considered it a credible hypothesis that such a beauty needed any trick to attract men to her. But he had not given up on the opportunity to flirt a little.

While slowly drinking the cup of tea that the young woman had just served him, Jérôme began to clumsily court her and eventually suggested sharing a brunch at La Coupole, the famous brasserie located at the corner of the street. The androgynous beauty kindly but firmly declined his offer. She was not available. But anyway, he had no regrets. He would have had no chance with her. And why was that? asked Jérôme, feeling a little vexed. The young woman smiled. He should not worry. It had nothing to do with his male charm. She simply preferred women, that was all...

Jérôme received this information like a cold shower. He had imagined everything but that. Yet, some signs should have alerted him. All the paintings surrounding him depicted female characters. Nude... and sometimes in couples. He apologised, and the stranger kindly amused herself with his confusion. He could not have known. No hard feelings, then. But she could not keep him any longer. Her... friend would soon come out of the bathroom.

Jérôme tried to keep a good face and stood up to say goodbye. What was the point of prolonging the conversation? Walking past the couch to head towards the door, he passed by the easel and couldn't help but take a closer look at the unfinished canvas.

"Is it her?" he couldn't help but ask. The beautiful stranger nodded with a smile. Intrigued, Jérôme looked at the portrait more closely and his blood froze. This woman, there, on the painting... He would have sworn it was his!

6 – AN HONEST WOMAN

"That'll teach me to be honest! When I found this wallet on the ground at the establishment where I work, I should have just thrown it away. It would have saved me from ending up here today, at the police station, accused of theft! When the cops stopped me for a routine check, as they call it, they found the wallet in my handbag... I had kept it for a few days, just in case someone came to claim it. But I was planning to bring it to the Lost and Found the next day! The cops didn't want to hear it. Apparently, I'm known to the police... Unfavourably, perhaps... But not as a pickpocket!

When these clever detectives opened the wallet, they managed to identify its owner and find his phone number. I could have done the same, for sure. But I'm not a police officer... I pointed out to them that I hadn't even touched the cash, and I breathed a sigh of relief. This kind man, happy to have his belongings back, would surely thank me, or at least clear my name...

An inspector told me not to get too excited. Checking the central file, he had just realised that the man had filed a complaint... for a snatch theft! The victim had been summoned to the police station to identify me, or not, as his attacker.

I tried to remain calm. They could only release me after that, since I didn't steal that wallet! The man would say it wasn't me, and they would apologise to me. An hour later, the inspector came to get me and took me to his office for the confrontation. The victim was already there.

When I saw this very dignified old gentleman, accompanied by his wife, it finally reassured me. It was clear right away that he wasn't the type to send an innocent person to jail. Besides, I thought I had already seen him somewhere. Maybe at my work. But I see so many people pass through...

"Well, go ahead, tell them it's her!" his wife commanded in an authoritative tone. This opening remark put me off a little. Fortunately, the gentleman didn't seem as certain and was stumbling a bit in his explanations. He couldn't remember exactly... It was dark...

The inspector, intrigued, interrupted him. "Dark? You reported that the theft occurred in the middle of the afternoon!" He added sarcastically, "There were no eclipses reported that day..." The old man seemed increasingly uneasy. "Yes, excuse me. I mean, it all happened very quickly. Anyway, this person is not my attacker..."

Unfortunately, the inspector was the persistent type. "I hope you're not lying just to let a pretty woman escape justice?" The man, increasingly embarrassed, glanced nervously at his wife and eventually confessed. "Listen, I lied before. I wasn't robbed of this wallet. I lost it..."

The inspector took time to digest this information before responding sternly. "That's called a false accusation. It's very serious, you know? You could be prosecuted... Why did you lie?"

The respectable old man, a little lost, offered an explanation. "When I told my wife that I had lost my wallet, she advised me to report it stolen. It was simpler for the insurance reimbursement, you understand?" His wife reluctantly confirmed these words. It was too late to deny it anyway. "I thought the person who found the wallet would keep it for themselves," she explained in an attempt to justify herself. "And then I thought the police had other things to do than deal with a small theft like this..."

This bad faith finished irritating the inspector. "Unfortunately for you, there are still honest women out there. And the police sometimes do their job properly..." As the man, crestfallen, looked at his shoes, the inspector once again examined the theft report drafted by the supposed victim a few days earlier. "I'll spare you the legal proceedings this time," said the magnanimous inspector. "But one last thing intrigues me. You claimed that this imaginary theft took place in the street in Vincennes, where you live. However, this young woman found it, absolutely intact, under a bench in the establishment where she works, in the ninth arrondissement of Paris. It didn't end up there by chance. Did you have any particular reason to lie about the location where you lost your wallet?"

The surly wife gave her husband a surprised look, evidently also expecting an explanation. As the crimson-faced man remained silent, the inspector turned to me and resumed mercilessly. "Could you remind us, dear Madame, what kind of establishment you work in, and what your profession is?"

Despite the disastrous marital consequences I foresaw for this poor man, I was obliged to respond. "Well... I'm a stripper in a cabaret in Pigalle."

7 – FAMILY PORTRAIT

The first thing Fabrice saw upon entering the house he hadn't visited in months was his grandmother's portrait hanging in the vestibule. His heart tightened. Just a few days before her 80th birthday, Mamie Angèle, who appeared to be in good health, had succumbed to a heart attack. Fortunately, she hadn't suffered. She had peacefully passed away in her sleep...

When he was a child, Fabrice often spent school holidays with his maternal grandmother. He especially cherished memories of Easter Mondays at her farm in the Val d'Oise. On that day, Mamie Angèle hid treats wrapped in gold or silver paper all around the house and garden. The property wasn't that big, but it seemed so to a child used to living in a small three-room apartment in Paris. And the farm provided so many hiding places! Rabbits and chocolate eggs mingled among the real ones in Mamie Angèle's rabbit hutch and poultry yard.

With a mischievous twinkle in her eye, Angèle had often told her grandson that the house held a real treasure, too well hidden to be found easily, and that he would inherit it upon her death. But for the time being, it had to remain a secret between them! He shouldn't tell anyone, not even his parents. Mamie Angèle didn't get along with her son-in-law, Fabrice's father. And for that reason, she was also at odds with her daughter, Fabrice's mother.

Alas, Angèle died suddenly, without having had the chance to reveal the hiding place of her supposed fortune to her grandson. Following her death, Fabrice's parents inherited the house. After much hesitation, Fabrice told his mother about Mamie Angèle's treasure. To his great surprise, she didn't burst out laughing.

Before the war, she told her son, Angèle had a certain fortune that came from her family. After the liberation, the money had disappeared... It was always thought that the Germans had stripped her of it, as had often happened with deportees. But no one had ever dared to question her about it when she returned from the camps. And she had never spoken about it to anyone. She had kept a paranoid distrust and a cult of secrecy from this period of persecution. She still seemed to fear that the Nazis would come back one day... So why wouldn't she have hidden a stash somewhere? Unless she simply made up this story to amuse her grandson...

In any case, the searches carried out after the grandmother's death were in vain. And Fabrice's parents had decided to sell this old farm, which they didn't know what to do with and which was in danger of falling into ruin. In a week, the house would have a new owner. And with it, Mamie Angèle's supposed treasure.

Fabrice, tasked with taking the few valuables left in the house before the arrival of the antique dealer, quickly surveyed the different rooms of the house. There was nothing to take except for memories. Mamie Angèle's poor furniture was all eaten away by worms...

As he was about to leave, Fabrice's gaze fell again on the portrait of his grandmother, in its golden frame. If he had to take only one thing, it would be that. He approached the painting to take a closer look. He had always seen this painting, apparently very old, hanging in this place, securely fixed to the wall of the vestibule. A crazy idea suddenly crossed his mind. What if this canvas was the work of a great master?

Many Impressionist painters had stayed in the region at the beginning of the last century. Mamie Angèle could have easily met one of them at the beginning of their career, when they were still struggling, and commissioned a portrait for a pittance. Or even, strictly speaking, in exchange for a good hot meal. And if that was Mamie Angèle's treasure? She had probably guessed that if her grandson had to keep only one thing of hers, it would be this portrait...

While indulging in hope, Fabrice felt a scruple. It would be heart-wrenching to have to sell this painting. It was all that was left of his grandmother, and memories have no price. But having it appraised didn't commit him to anything.

The next day, at the same time, the expert with whom Fabrice had an appointment rang the doorbell. Fabrice let him into the vestibule and showed him the painting. Without a word, the expert leaned over the portrait and examined it carefully. No signature was apparent, but a specialist like him would recognise at first glance the work of a grand master. Official authentication would then be a formality...

Fabrice's heart was beating as he waited for the verdict of this art expert. The latter raised his head, took off his presbyopic glasses, and looked him in the eye. "So?" asked Fabrice, full of hope...

"I'm certain," said the expert in a peremptory tone. "This painting, although old, is the work of an amateur. Its value can only be sentimental." Strangely, Fabrice felt almost relieved. He would not have to struggle with his conscience. This portrait having no market value, he would have no choice but to keep it. In memory of his grandmother. Mischievous Angèle had made fun of him! It was, in a way, a symbolic treasure...

Returning to reality, Fabrice was surprised, however, to see the expert leaning towards the painting again. Did he have a change of heart? Was he going to announce that he had made a mistake after all and that this painting was an authentic masterpiece? But now the expert seemed rather intrigued by the heavy gilded frame fixed to the wall. Perhaps he was surprised to find that, unlike all the wooden furniture in the house, it was not eaten away by worms...

The expert finally turned to Fabrice and confirmed his initial judgment. "This painting is definitely a daub. But I can certify, however, that its frame is solid gold!"

8 – FALLEN FROM THE SKY

For almost a year now, Melanie Dubois and Sandrine Lemoine had been working together as saleswomen in a perfume shop in the shopping gallery of Roissy airport. Their relationship had been stormy. Melanie reproached her colleague for lacking ambition, especially with men, and for being satisfied with a mere baggage handler as her fiancé. Melanie, on the other hand, aimed higher. Unfortunately, her Prince Charming was taking too long to get caught in her nets, and the beautiful social climber had been single for months.

Sandrine had suggested introducing Melanie to her brother Jean-Luc. However, Melanie had declined the offer, deeming it unworthy of her. Jean-Luc, a friend of Sandrine's fiancé, was like him a "lowly" baggage handler with no future... Sandrine, of course, did not appreciate the contempt her colleague showed her day in and day out.

However, that day, fate finally seemed to be smiling at Melanie... As soon as he entered the shop, she knew he was the one! Yes, strapped in his airline pilot uniform, tall, handsome, and with a slightly tanned complexion, he had everything she had been waiting for for so long...

Even more miraculously, it seemed that the feeling was mutual. While the man asked her for advice on choosing a perfume supposedly for his mother, Melanie immediately felt that she was not leaving him indifferent. This time, she was sure it was a big fish biting the hook and did everything she could to gently reel him in. While, of course, leaving her prince with the illusion of having the initiative, Melanie did so well that he dared to ask her out to dinner.

It was nearly 8 p.m. The store was about to close. Melanie hesitated for a moment. By accepting this impromptu invitation from a stranger, she risked being seen as an easy girl. On the other hand, by letting him go, she might never see him again. His job would take him to all corners of the world. Perhaps weeks would pass before his flight schedules brought him back to Roissy. And would he still want to seek the favour of a saleswoman who had rejected him then?

A glance towards Sandrine convinced Melanie. From a distance, her colleague had observed the scene with a mixture of poorly disguised curiosity, secret disapproval, and perhaps even envy... No, Melanie thought, definitely not worth missing out on such an opportunity!

This dinner was enchanting for her. Unable to leave Roissy, where he had to leave for a distant destination the next morning, the handsome pilot invited Melanie to one of the airport restaurants. It was certainly not a gastronomic establishment, but for Melanie, a meal with him in a self-service restaurant would have been worth the best of feasts. Under his spell, she almost forgot that by accepting this invitation, her initial objective was to find a good catch.

Despite a slight awkwardness, probably due to his shyness, her suitor was charming. The meal passed like a dream. The wine was excellent. And she even forgot to ask for his name.

As they were about to leave, it was she who suggested they have a last drink at the hotel bar where he had booked a room in preparation for his early morning departure. He agreed, of course, but she felt a slight disappointment when she thought she saw a shadow of hesitation in his eyes. For both of them, however, it was already impossible to pull back. The first kiss they exchanged in a discreet corner of the lobby inflamed their senses, and it was from the minibar in the room that he produced the bottle of champagne intended to celebrate their encounter.

Throwing to the winds all the rigorous principles she had set for herself to find a wealthy husband, it was Melanie who led her lover to the bed. Certainly, she had always promised herself not to give herself away on the first night. But this time it was different. She was really in love...

Obviously, he wanted it just as much as she did. But something seemed to hold him back. He had, he said, something to confess... This only surprised her halfway. This fairy tale was really too good to be true. There had to be a catch somewhere. And then, all evening, she had sensed a growing discomfort in him as things became clearer between them. Was he already engaged? Married? Condemned by medicine? Impotent, clearly not... She silenced him with a kiss. She preferred not to know. Not just yet. And he didn't have the strength to insist.

When she woke up the next morning, there was no one next to her in the bed. "Here we go," she said to herself, her heart heavy. Without a word, he had left. He must have gone back to his wife. She would never see him again, and she would never even know his name. Sandrine would have a field day lecturing her at the store later, but now she didn't care about that. Regardless of the identity of this charming stranger, she just wanted to hold him one last time in her arms...

Then she heard the crackling of the shower coming from the bathroom. She scanned the room and saw the crumpled pilot uniform lying on a chair... She felt an immense relief. As if afraid that her lover would disappear again if she fell back asleep, she jumped up to open the curtains. The room was flooded with light. She then decided to hang up the uniform. Hadn't he said that he had to leave that morning at the controls of his plane? What would his charming flight attendants think if they saw him so wrinkled?

Melanie grabbed the slightly worn jacket, which she hadn't noticed the night before in the heat of the moment. That was when something fell out of the inner pocket. A passport... She had been so afraid of never knowing the name of her handsome pilot that she couldn't resist her curiosity.

Her smile froze as the information on the document revealed the true identity of her Prince Charming. Jean-Luc Lemoine, Sandrine's brother! A baggage handler by profession... On the back of the jacket was sewn a patch with the emblem of a costume rental shop.

It was then that Jean-Luc emerged from the bathroom, in the nude, a sheepish smile on his lips...

9 – THE FINAL APPOINTMENT

At the dawn of her fifties, the famous actress Sandra Norman was already becoming a living legend. However, she felt that the decline of her career, and therefore her life, was underway. Alexis Orlov, her favourite director who was also her lover, had just preferred a barely graduated starlet over her as the lead in his next film. Of course, Sandra was no longer young enough to play the ingenue. But she found it hard to accept being relegated to playing only mothers or neglected wives. She, who had only played femme fatales on screen until then and had sacrificed everything for her career, hadn't even taken the time to have a child. Feeling very depressed, Sandra had started drinking. The ravages of alcohol now added to the ravages of time on her face. Alexis was gradually distancing himself from her, increasingly unable to tolerate the star's mood swings caused by her excessive drinking. Was it time for Sandra to take her final bow?

That evening, she had arranged to meet her lover in the luxurious suite she occupied on the top floor of a palace during her stays in Paris. As expected, the conversation quickly turned into an argument. After a final scuffle, she struck Alexis with the statuette of the last Oscar he had helped her win, with such force that he collapsed unconscious on the bed. He had also been drinking quite a bit during the evening. Now, he seemed to be breathing peacefully. She didn't worry too much and thought it best to let him sleep...

In the salon mirror, Sandra looked at her face, swollen from tears, without mercy. She was unrecognisable. It was impossible, in this state, to go to the charity gala organised by "Parents du Monde", the orphan support association she sponsored to ease her conscience, as she had promised. But she also didn't have the courage to face the paparazzi, who would inevitably chase her mercilessly wherever she went once she left the hotel.

Gathering what little energy she had left, Sandra asked Caroline, her maid, to take her place in the limousine that was supposed to take her to the grand Parisian theatre where the gala was to be held. Caroline was about the same size as Sandra. To fool the photographers, she would also wear the star's clothes and veil hat, and after a little tour of Paris, the driver would take her back home.

Everything went according to plan. Like a pack of greyhounds on an English racetrack, the paparazzi on motorcycles chased after the decoy that was offered to them. While Sandra slipped out the back door of the palace, where the taxi that was supposed to take her to the airport was waiting for her. Her destination was Venice, where incognito, she had decided to drown her sorrows for a few days in the vapours of the carnival.

Sandra arrived safely in the City of Doges, where she checked into a discreet hotel under an assumed name. During the day, she remained holed up in her

room, sleeping, smoking, and drinking. At nightfall, she mingled with the masked crowds of the Venice carnival. Intoxicated by this unreal atmosphere, she sometimes regained a taste for life. But every dawn, as she staggered along a deserted canal to return to her hotel, she felt the urge to let herself slide into its black waters to end it all. She quickly realised that running away was not the solution and decided to return to Paris.

On the plane, she couldn't get her hands on a French newspaper. Despite the early hour, she swallowed a few whiskies and dozed off. An hour later, she was awakened by the voice of the hostess, announcing the descent to Orly. The passenger sitting next to her looked at her in a strange way, no doubt impressed to have made the trip in the company of the famous Sandra Norman. And perhaps also a little shocked to see her like this, without makeup and already quite drunk, so different from the flattering image presented of her in glossy magazines.

After retrieving her luggage, she headed for the exit. Once again, she met some lingering looks, which decided her to stop in the airport toilets to freshen up. She then took a taxi back to Paris. The driver didn't even turn around when she announced the destination of the trip. She still preferred this indifference to the unhealthy curiosity of the onlookers.

First of all, she wanted to have a final explanation with Alexis. One did not leave Sandra Norman. It was out of the question to see her lover gradually neglect her. She would take the initiative to break up. Alexis occupied a vast renovated loft in the 20th arrondissement. On Avenue de la République, the taxi got caught in a traffic jam, and she decided to continue on foot. This would allow her to sober up a little and fine-tune her breakup speech...

The crowd was gathering outside Père-Lachaise cemetery. It seemed like all of Paris had come together there. Even all the riot policemen of the capital were present. Two of them spotted her and exchanged a few low words, as if to make sure it was really her before calling out to her. Suddenly overcome by a sinister presentiment, Sandra blended into the crowd to escape them... An awful doubt crossed her mind. What if they were burying Alexis? Had he succumbed to the powerful blow she had dealt him to the temple?

This tragic hypothesis found some validation when, passing by a newsstand, Sandra's gaze fell upon the front page of a magazine. A photo of her and Alexis, from the time when the story of their stormy love affair fuelled the scandal sheets... She bought the magazine and took refuge in the dark back room of a café to read it away from prying eyes. The headlines indeed spoke of a tragedy...

She learned all the details while reading the article: the crashed limousine, the comatose driver, the passenger burned to ashes... All the papers presented Sandra Norman as dead and announced her funeral for that very morning!

10 – BAD PLAN

Maurice had never been lucky. He was born under a bad star and since then everything always went wrong for him. The story of his unhappy childhood allowed him to appease the judges during his frequent appearances in court, to account for the petty scams and small-scale trafficking he lived off. All minor offences that inevitably led him back to prison. Maurice's plans, in fact, always ended up going wrong. His bad luck had become so legendary that his guards at the detention centre had nicknamed him Momo the Jinx...

This time, however, Momo had planned everything. For his next heist, he had set his sights on the post office of the small town where he had spent his childhood. He couldn't be recognised there, as he hadn't set foot in this town since he was eighteen. Since that fateful day when his mother, furious to learn of his first theft from the local supermarket by discovering his loot hidden under his bed, had herself reported him to the police in the hope of bringing him back on the straight and narrow...

In vain. Shortly after, Maurice had left his family home to pursue his chaotic career as a small-time crook elsewhere. And he had never returned to his hometown again.

But today, for Maurice, returning to the scene of his first crime presented a major advantage. He knew the layout of the post office where he had done a summer internship as a teenager. This familiarity with the place would make his task easier. The day before, discreetly, he had carried out a little reconnaissance by going to buy a book of stamps. Nothing had changed. The premises were still as dilapidated. And the security systems were just as outdated. Not even a functioning surveillance camera.

Thanks to the deposits from the many businesses in the town, however, the safe was probably still well-stocked at the end of the day. The truck collecting the funds passed by around 6pm. By robbing the post office just before closing time, Maurice could hope to leave with a comfortable haul.

Parked in front of the post office, waiting to take action, Momo was already jubilant at the thought of reading about his exploits in the local newspaper the next day. Anonymous, of course. If everything went well, that is... Besides the tens of thousands of euros he would pocket, it would be a kind of revenge against fate for him.

Maurice looked at his watch. 5:30 pm. It was time to go. A quarter of an hour would be enough for him to collect the money and leave before the van arrived. He got out of the car and walked slowly towards the entrance of the post office. Just before entering, he pulled his hood over his face and took the gun out of his jacket pocket, which would serve as his decisive argument to get the contents of the safe. The gun wasn't loaded, but only he knew that. In case of trouble, the

bill would be less heavy... But this time, there would be no hitch. He had thought of everything.

Entering, Maurice saw that many customers were still inside the post office. So much so that, at first, no one noticed the presence of this worrying hooded and armed individual. To signal his presence, and clarify his intentions, Momo shouted, "This is a hold-up! Everyone on the ground!"

Struck with astonishment, all the customers obeyed in unison while, behind their counter, the three employees remained frozen in their seats. "Hands up!" Maurice yelled to prevent any of them from pressing the alarm button directly connected to the police station.

The employees gently obeyed. Maurice lowered the curtain of the glass door leading to the outside, so that passersby wouldn't see what was happening in the post office, and to deter any latecomers from entering a few minutes before closing.

So far, so good, thought Maurice with satisfaction. He approached the oldest of the three employees and pointed his gun at him. "You have a minute to put the contents of the safe in a bag and give it to me!" The man was close to retirement. Maurice knew he wouldn't play the hero. In fact, he did what his attacker asked him to do without any resistance.

In less than a minute, Maurice had a bag full of banknotes in his hand. He didn't take the time to count them, but judging by the weight, there must have been a substantial amount. The next step was to leave the scene without the post office staff triggering the alarm immediately. But Maurice had also planned for that...

Among all the customers lying face down, he randomly chose one to take as a hostage to cover his escape. "You, come with me," he said to the unfortunate hostage. Maurice immediately added, for the benefit of the employees, "If you don't want any trouble, wait five minutes before notifying the police!" The employees, petrified, nodded, and Maurice headed towards the door, dragging his hostage with him.

Before stepping out the door, Maurice took care to remove his hood, so as not to attract the attention of passers-by, and put his pistol back in the pocket of his jacket. In any case, this hostage-taking was only meant to impress the post office staff and give him time to flee in his car.

As soon as he was in the street, Maurice realised that things wouldn't go exactly as planned. A zealous traffic warden, with her ticket book in hand, was circling around Momo's car, which she was about to ticket for parking violations...

Nothing was lost yet. Maurice decided to abandon his vehicle. He would flee on foot and return a few days later to retrieve his car. With the loot he had in his bag, he could easily pay a small fine. He wouldn't risk being recognised. No one had seen his face in the post office. And even now that he had removed his hood, his trembling hostage kept his head bowed to the ground, clearly on the verge of fainting. Oh no, there was no question of giving up! If the hostage

collapsed in the middle of the street, they would immediately attract the attention of passersby. And especially that of the traffic warden, who was only a few meters away.

Maurice was about to make his escape by leaving the person he was holding tightly by the arm when he heard a loud voice calling out to him. "Momo? Is that you!"

Dumbfounded, Maurice finally turned to face his hostage. In the heat of the moment, he hadn't taken the time to look at the woman's face. And what he saw sent shivers down his spine...

There, staring at him disapprovingly, was... his mother!

11 – SENTENCED TO DEATH

A death sentence! That's how Edouard received the diagnosis that Doctor Baupin had just dealt him, after he had asked him to tell him the truth without beating around the bush. Among the flood of incomprehensible medical terms that the doctor had just used, he only remembered a few: inoperable tumour, life prognosis, palliative care... He immediately translated it as: no hope, slow agony, inevitable decline... Certainly, the recurring headaches he had been suffering from for a few weeks should have alerted him. But how could he have guessed, when he had finally decided to consult a doctor on the advice of Julia, his wife, that his fate was already sealed?

"How long?" he had only asked to conclude the interview. "Six months," the specialist had replied. "A year, at most." Just enough time to get his affairs in order and to ensure his wife was financially secure, Edouard had thought. Before leaving the office, however, he demanded a promise from the doctor. Not a word to anyone, not even to Julia. He would be the one to announce it when the time came. Doctor Baupin, almost offended, reassured him on this point. In any case, he was bound by medical confidentiality.

Upon returning home, Edouard did everything to hide the truth from his wife. He told her that his migraines were due only to overwork, and that they would go away with the new medications prescribed by Doctor Baupin. Julia seemed to believe him, and to celebrate this reassuring news, he invited her to a restaurant. It had been a long time since he had seen his wife so happy. Yet, despite the unusual good mood that he himself tried to display that evening, he knew that these few moments of happiness would be the last.

In the days that followed, without Julia's knowledge, he settled all of his current affairs and drew up a will with his lawyer that would allow his young widow to immediately dispose of all of his fortune. He had no intention of leaving any part, no matter how small, of his imposing inheritance to his children with whom he had been estranged since his recent remarriage. Julia was intelligent, but having never worked, he did not imagine that she could support herself. To spare her any trouble, he even went as far as taking out a funeral agreement that would relieve her of the burden of organising a funeral.

As for the rest, his mind was made up. He had no intention of waiting for the illness that was eating away at him to gradually reduce him to a vegetative state, incapable of making any decisions. With an iron will, he had controlled his fate throughout his life. He also wanted to be able to choose his end. An end that he wanted to be dignified. And given the circumstances, he saw only one way out.

A few days later, he arranged for Julia to spend the weekend at their country house in Sologne. He was supposed to join her on Sunday. Edouard kissed his wife one last time, as if nothing was wrong, but with a slightly more pronounced tenderness that should have worried her. He watched the car drive away, then

went into his office and shot himself in the temple with the revolver that he had kept in his safe, unused, for years to protect his family from potential criminals. How could he have known when he bought the weapon that it would claim no other victim but himself?

It was the cleaning lady who discovered Edouard's lifeless body the next morning, lying in a pool of blood. It was, in fact, to spare Julia from this terrible sight that he had sent her away. The ultimate proof of his love...

On the desk, prominently displayed, he had left a letter for her. He revealed to her the incurable illness that had condemned him to this dramatic outcome. The only one conceivable for him. By hastening his end, he controlled the circumstances. He, who had always wanted to control everything. And in doing so, he spared his beloved wife, and himself, the unnecessary pain of a painful decline. He preferred her to remember him as a man in the prime of his life, in full possession of his faculties. Not as a pathetic dying man clinging to life against all hope.

Although devastated by her husband's passing, Julia, who had returned hastily from Sologne, was not surprised by his suicide. As if driven by a sinister premonition, Edouard had repeatedly affirmed to her that if necessary, he would not let the illness decide on the date of his death. His first wife had been taken by an incurable disease, and he did not want to inflict on Julia the trial that his long agony had been for him.

The funeral was held in the strictest privacy. No flowers or wreaths, in accordance with the deceased's wishes. And without the help of religion. Edouard was not a believer and, by choosing to voluntarily end his life, he had indeed defied the precepts of the Church. Edouard's children, knowing they had already been cheated out of their inheritance, did not even attend the ceremony. Apart from Julia, only Doctor Baupin and a few idle neighbours accompanied Edouard's remains to Père-Lachaise, where he was cremated. Edouard had not specified anything precise on this point. It was Julia who opted for this solution, which seemed more in keeping with her idea of her husband. During his lifetime, he had refused to see his body gradually wither away. Why impose this decline on him after his death?

As they left the cemetery, after receiving the customary condolences from the few people present, Dr. Baupin offered to accompany Julia back to her home. He understood her pain and preferred not to leave her alone in this sad circumstance, without even a loved one to confide in about her feelings. She accepted without a word and got into the car, taking with her the ashes of the deceased. During the entire journey from the cemetery to the luxurious townhouse that Edouard had bequeathed to his wife along with the rest of his fortune, they remained silent. Dr. Baupin parked the car in the cobblestone courtyard and supported the grieving young woman inside the bourgeois home.

However, as soon as the door was closed, the young widow carelessly placed the urn containing Edouard's ashes on the ground, tore off the black veil that covered her coquettishly made-up face, and tenderly embraced the doctor who had condemned her husband. "I thought it would never end," she said with a sigh. "Do you really think we're out of danger?" Baupin kissed her passionately before answering. "It's better to stay cautious for a few more months. But there was no autopsy, since the cause of death was beyond doubt!" He pointed to the urn with a sarcastic smile. "Even if an investigation were conducted later, how would the police prove that Edouard never had a brain tumour?"

12 – DANGEROUS LIAISON

"I am your husband's mistress," the pretty blonde said to Chantal, the words landing like a guillotine. Chantal took a moment to consider the statement before understanding its full meaning.

The previous evening, Chantal's husband Jérôme, a professor at La Sorbonne, had called her in the late afternoon to say he would be working late in the library to finish his next book, a reference work on Cholderlos de Laclos, the author of *Dangerous Liaisons*, that his publisher had been requesting for months. But shortly after hanging up, Chantal received an unusual phone call. A young woman named Sandra had said she needed to urgently meet with her and that she should not mention it to her husband. Her voice was grave, indicating the importance of the meeting. Chantal had agreed to meet Sandra in a tea room across from Beaubourg, without further explanation.

The next morning, Jérôme was to leave for three days for Rome to consult archives about the last days of Laclos in Tarente and to meet with colleagues. Chantal had let him go without telling him about the mysterious phone call.

Of course, as their twenty-fifth wedding anniversary approached, Chantal and Jérôme's relationship had lost some of its youthful passion. But despite a foreboding feeling, Chantal had no idea what Sandra was about to reveal to her. There may have been some bumps in the road for Jérôme with the difficult transition to middle age, but Chantal had never known anything about it or had chosen to ignore it. She had assumed that he had finally settled down. However, the few final words that Sandra had just uttered left her with little choice.

With hindsight, of course, Jérôme's behaviour over the past few months should have alerted her. He was coming home later and later. More and more often. Taking less and less trouble to invent original excuses. The long evenings spent alone at the Centre Georges Pompidou library, where he was unreachable since he had to switch off his phone, was a convenient alibi to cover up an affair. As for that book that Jérôme was supposed to be working on, he could drag out the writing indefinitely.

But then why this meeting...? "What do you want?" Chantal asked in a white voice. Sandra didn't answer right away. She seemed to hesitate. Perhaps she already regretted her move. But it was too late to back out. "I'm pregnant," she finally blurted out. Almost immediately adding, as if it made the matter less serious, "Jérôme doesn't know."

Recovered from her initial surprise, Chantal understood less and less. "And it's to give me the scoop on this happy news that you wanted to meet me?" she tried to joke, even though she didn't really feel like laughing. Sandra lifted her head and fixed her in the eyes. Obviously, past the initial embarrassment, she had decided to stand her ground. "I want to keep the child, but I'll leave you the father." The father... This word, associated with Jérôme, sounded painfully in

Chantal's ears. They hadn't been able to have children together. She knew she was sterile. But she had never felt that it could be a frustration for Jérôme. Not to the point, anyway, of wanting to start a new life with someone else. Today, she no longer knew very well who her husband was, what he really thought or felt. Was he lying to her for months?

"I know that Jérôme will leave you if he finds out that I'm carrying his child. He told me that. But that's not what I want. I'm willing to leave him, but I need money..." Chantal's chest tightened. She had trouble breathing. "Are you asking me to pay you to get my husband back? Is this blackmail?" Sandra looked at her with an embarrassed expression, and Chantal almost felt sorry for her. She didn't really have the profile of a blackmailer. How old could she be? Twenty years old? Maybe even less... "I'm still a student," she continued. "I have no income at the moment. My family, I prefer not to talk about it... I don't want to break up your couple. I love Jérôme but... Unlike him, I don't think it can work very long between us... So it's better to break up right away, before he finds out I'm pregnant. Because I'm determined to keep this baby. And for that, I need something to live on, until the baby is born. After that, I'll find a job. With a little money in front of me, I can go back to Lyon right away... instead of going to meet Jérôme in Rome, as planned."

Chantal suddenly felt very tired. She wanted to finish this. "How much?" she asked. "Ten thousand," Sandra said before adding, "Ten thousand euros." Chantal felt tears welling up in her eyes, but she held them back, out of pride. Ten thousand euros... That's how much her marriage of twenty-five years was valued at. Chantal knew she had to make a decision, and that decision would engage the rest of her life. But she couldn't take it anymore. "I'll meet you here the day after tomorrow," she murmured, getting up. Before leaving, not really sure what she was saying, she added in a whisper, "I'll give you the money." In the street, she burst into tears.

The two days that followed were a true ordeal for her. The closer the time for her appointment approached, the less she knew what she should do. Of course, she resented Jérôme for betraying her. She would have surely strangled him if only he had been there. But he was in Rome, waiting for his mistress who would not show up. After pondering the problem in her mind all night, she made her decision, and the next morning she went to the bank to withdraw the ten thousand euros deposited on an account in anticipation of the soon-to-be-replaced old car. She still didn't know what attitude she would adopt towards Jérôme when his mistress would leave him for the price of a low-end car, but she was sure of one thing. If she had to separate from her husband, before asking for a divorce, she would get her revenge by showing him, with evidence, how little his Lolita valued the love she had for him. Not to mention, of course, the child she was expecting, who he would never be the father of.

As she was coming back from the bank with the small pouch containing the fifty two-hundred-euro bills, she heard the phone ringing. Was it Sandra calling from Rome, having changed her mind, to announce that she finally wanted to start a life with the father of her child?

The call did indeed come from Rome. But it was Jérôme. He called from the airport to tell her that he was coming back one day earlier than planned. It didn't really surprise Chantal. Since his mistress had stood him up, he had no reason to stay there any longer. However, the very idea of seeing him in the apartment they had shared for so many years seemed unbearable to her. Following her instinct, she suggested that he meet her at the tea room where she had an appointment with Sandra. Feigning a cheerful tone, she told Jérôme that she had a surprise for him. Sullen, Jérôme accepted at her insistence. But he didn't seem to be in the mood to enjoy surprises...

A few hours later, Chantal joined Sandra in front of the Beaubourg museum. The young girl was already waiting for her. She looked nervous. And this time, Chantal, resigned, felt calmer. Tonight, her life would be shattered. But for the moment, she had her revenge. She just had to keep Sandra there until Jérôme arrived, which shouldn't be long.

"I have the money," she said. "But I demand guarantees. I don't want my husband to be able to blame me for organising this gruesome transaction myself. Let him think that it was my idea to pay you to leave him..." It was Sandra's turn to be on the defensive. "What do you want?" Chantal looked her straight in the eyes, savouring the distress she could read in her gaze. "A letter. A letter written in your own hand, explaining the reasons and circumstances of your departure. So that my husband knows exactly what he's getting into."

Chantal pushed the blank sheet of paper and pencil she had prepared towards the young girl. Sandra seemed to hesitate. Then she made up her mind. While she reluctantly scribbled a few lines, Chantal caught sight of her husband entering the tea room and looking for her. Jérôme finally spotted the table where his wife was seated, while Sandra, with her back turned, angrily signed the letter she had just written. The timing was perfect. Chantal took the sheet of paper and handed Sandra the pouch containing the ten thousand euros. The young girl grabbed it, stuffed it into her bag, and got up to leave just as Jérôme approached the table. When Sandra recognised Jérôme, she panicked. She shot a furious look at Chantal, realising that she had been betrayed, and without a word to her or a glance at Jérôme, rushed towards the door.

Jérôme glanced surprised at the young girl who had just bumped into him so hastily as she left. He seemed in a bad mood. "Who's that crazy woman?" he asked Chantal as a way of greeting. Chantal's face froze and she couldn't articulate a word. Moreover, visibly preoccupied by more important concerns, Jérôme didn't seem to expect an answer. "I had such a hard time finding a taxi... Everything is going wrong these days. When I arrived in Rome, I realised that I had lost my diary and my address book. I probably forgot them at the library... So I came back earlier for that reason."

After getting rid of his luggage, taking off his raincoat, and sitting down at the table, Jérôme finally looked up at his wife. "And you? What's this good news you wanted to tell me? Did you buy the new car and are you taking me home with it?"

As if petrified, Chantal didn't answer. Staring blankly at the tea room door through which the unknown woman had just disappeared. With their ten thousand euros in cash...

13 – THE JACKPOT

"Either it's her or me!" Caroline shouted angrily at her husband. For some time now, the young woman could no longer stand the presence under her roof of Marguerite, Fabien's mother. The elderly woman had moved in temporarily with her son and daughter-in-law after the death of her husband. It was impossible for her now to climb the five floors of the small building without an elevator with a bag of groceries, where she had spent happy days for more than thirty years.

At first, it had been planned to relocate Fabien's mother to a more functional apartment. But the modest proceeds from the sale of the two-room apartment had barely covered the poorly reimbursed medical expenses incurred during the long hospitalisation of Marguerite's deceased husband. And then the elderly woman's health had quickly deteriorated. She could no longer live independently. And what was supposed to be temporary had taken on the appearance of being permanent...

Until that morning, when Caroline, fed up, gave Julien an ultimatum. "Either you put your mother in a nursing home, or I'm leaving." Julien understood his wife's revolt. Their children were already grown and had left the family nest. But Caroline was still young. Now she wanted to go out. To travel. To enjoy life a little, of course within their modest means. However, since Julien's mother had moved in with them, the couple's life had been completely disrupted. Unable to afford to employ someone to take care of Marguerite, Julien and Caroline were required to take turns so as not to leave her alone for too long. No more plans for vacations at the seaside. No more impromptu outings to the cinema. Goodbye to dinners for two. Even at home... "I'll talk to her tonight, I promise," said Julien resignedly before putting on his raincoat to leave for work.

Meanwhile, Marguerite tried to be as discreet as possible. But she could see that her intrusion into the couple's intimacy was difficult for her daughter-in-law to bear. So she tried to put on a brave face when Julien, feeling uncomfortable, broached the possibility of putting her in a nursing home that same evening. Given the low amount of pension her mother received, he could not promise her a luxury residence. But he would do his best to find something good... Marguerite's already fragile heart tightened. However, she didn't let her dismay show. "Don't worry, Julien. I understand very well. I can't continue to be a burden on you any longer. As soon as you find something, I'll leave."

Julien was about to leave the room when his mother called out to him one last time. "You haven't forgotten my lottery ticket, have you?" she asked in a soft voice. "No, don't worry," Julien replied, handing her the receipt. "Are you still playing your social security number?" he added with a smile. "Always!" said the old lady. "With that number, I'm sure to hit the jackpot sooner or later..."

Once the door was closed, Marguerite gave free rein to her despair. Of course, they would come and see her over there... But for her, this exile would be the

beginning of the end. Her horizon was already practically reduced to the four walls of her room, where she avoided going out so as not to disturb too much. The only pleasure left to her was the lottery ticket she asked her son to validate for her twice a week. She sighed, thinking of the ticket her son had just given her. Ah, if only she could hit the jackpot! Then she would no longer be a burden on anyone. Of course, at her age, she did not hope to start a new life. But she would at least have the satisfaction of leaving her son something other than troubles...

Caroline was the one who discovered Marguerite's lifeless body slumped in her armchair in front of the still-lit television the following morning. The doctor concluded it was a heart attack, which was not surprising for a woman of her age. But Julien couldn't help feeling guilty. Had their conversation the day before hastened her end? Caroline tried to reassure her husband. "Marguerite had already had a few scares. And after all, wasn't it the best solution... She passed away peacefully, watching TV. She probably didn't suffer."

Marguerite was buried a few days later. Julien felt a pang in his heart as he bid his final farewell to his mother before the coffin was closed. She was wearing the same dress she had been wearing when he had last seen her alive.

A few days later, when Caroline opened the local newspaper, she saw an article on the front page that caught her attention. "The winning ticket for the Super Jackpot of the lottery was validated in a small village in the Val de Marne. The lucky winner has not yet come forward." Caroline handed the newspaper to her husband. "Look, it's in our village!" she exclaimed excitedly. "What if it was your mother?" "Marguerite?" Julien exclaimed incredulously. "She has a good reason not to come forward..." replied Caroline. Julien took the newspaper and went up to Marguerite's room, where her papers had not yet been sorted. He soon came across a medical receipt and compared the numbers.

A few seconds later, he was running down the stairs four at a time. "It's her!" he exclaimed. "She won!" Caroline couldn't believe her ears. "It might even be what killed her," Julien continued. Caroline gave him a questioning look. "The TV!" Julien explained. "It's probably while she was watching the lottery results that she had the heart attack!"

The next step was to find the ticket that Julien had given his mother a few days earlier. The couple searched Marguerite's room, then the whole house from top to bottom. The winning ticket remained unfound...

Caroline finally questioned her husband. "Try to remember... When you gave her the ticket, what did she do with it?" Julien made an effort to remember the scene. "Well... I handed her the receipt, as usual, and... she absentmindedly stuffed it in the pocket of her dress." Her dress? Which dress?" Caroline impatiently exclaimed. "The blue one!" Julien said in a dull voice. "Her last dress that was still wearable," he added, suddenly realising where the winning ticket of the lottery jackpot was. Caroline's face turned pale. "The one she was buried in..." she concluded, devastated.

14 – EVICTION ORDER SUSPENDED

Simon feels heavy-hearted. Tomorrow, he will be evicted from the pretty house with a garden where he hoped to spend his remaining days. The city hall wants to clear the site to install... a municipal landfill. There is indeed a competing project: the construction, at the other end of the town, of a cogeneration plant. Burning waste to produce the hot water needed for urban heating, and to supply electricity to the city, is more environmentally friendly. But unfortunately, it requires at the outset a larger investment. An investment that the mayor is not willing to make today...

Until the last moment, Simon has tried every possible recourse to avoid this eviction. But what can an old man do alone against an all-powerful administration, hiding behind the laws it has itself enacted? Nevertheless, Simon cannot bring himself to leave. From his window, in the garden, he catches sight of Caroline's frail silhouette, taking her daily walk. She's an old lady too. How old is she, exactly? Ninety years old? Ninety-five? She might even be a centenarian...

When Simon inherited this house about twenty years ago, Caroline was already living in it. She was part of the furniture, in a way, and Simon's parents, before they died, made him promise not to put her out on the street. At first, of course, as an old bachelor, he was not very enthusiastic about this cohabitation. And then, little by little, he got used to Caroline's discreet presence. Twenty years of living together, of shared joys and sorrows, create bonds! And now, should she also leave this house? Her safest refuge sheltered from the threat of men and from this modern civilisation of which she knows nothing? She wouldn't recover from it. Not at her age...

Embraced by emotion, Simon went to join Caroline in the garden. Against all hope, he is still looking for a solution. It would be enough to delay the eviction for a few days! In a week, it will be winter, and he would not be expellable until spring. By then, he is certain that the town hall officials will prefer to choose the competing project. Elections are looming, and they are in a hurry to finish, as environmentalists are starting to mobilise against the installation of a dump on the outskirts of the town...

Simon has just caught Caroline's sidelong glance. Even if she says nothing, her eyes seem to plead with him to do something to prevent this impending catastrophe. He looks at her in turn, tears in his eyes. Obviously, his faithful companion would like to be of some help to him. But how could this poor old Caroline, so frail and wrinkled, help him stop the police who will come to expel them by force tomorrow morning?

Simon cannot help but smile at the thought of this confrontation, then suddenly his face freezes. Looking at Caroline, a ridiculous idea has just crossed his mind. No, it would be too good to be true! But it is worth checking at least...

Leaving his old friend there, without any explanation, Simon rushes into his office to turn on his computer and connect to the Internet. The search engine homepage takes an endless amount of time to load. He really should get broadband for Christmas... Feverishly, Simon types in a few keywords and waits for the search results to appear on the screen. 3,827 responses! At least the literature on the subject is abundant! But he will have to take the time to sort through and explore all the links to find the information he is looking for and confirm the validity of his attack plan...

At daybreak, it was the sun shining through the shutters that woke up Simon, dozing off on his keyboard. He had spent the whole night surfing the web. No matter! It was worth it!

Caroline is still asleep, but the bell on the garden gate also wakes her up. Pulling back the curtains, Simon looks out the window and sees, behind the two police hats, three blue vans. The police have come in force! Do they fear that Simon and Caroline have prepared for a siege to avoid eviction? Or are the vans simply meant to take the furniture out of the house, along with its occupants...

In any case, it is with a peaceful but confident air that Simon advances towards the police to receive them. Caroline follows him with the courage of a senator, to support him.

"Gentlemen, representatives of the public force, the administration cannot violate a regulation that it has itself enacted," Simon declares to the police. "My companion Caroline, who is present here, is subject to very strict protection. The law expressly stipulates that she cannot be evicted from her home without a specific written authorisation" Simon hands the astonished police officers the law text that he discovered on the internet, freshly printed. "An authorisation that will take at least a few weeks to obtain," he continues. "If you obtain it..."

Examining the law text and Caroline in turn, who observes them with a haughty air, the police officers confer in a low voice, visibly very embarrassed. "Well, yes, it's strange, but that's how it is," concludes Simon triumphantly, knowing that he has won the game. "In this country, it is easier to evict an old man from his house... than a turtle belonging to a protected species!"

15 - KIDNAPPING

As Laurence opened her door, returning from a hard day at work, she was surprised not to see her daughter Léa running towards her to greet her, as usual. Perhaps she had lingered a bit on the way home from school... It was on her way back to the entrance that she saw the note that had been slipped under the door. She picked it up and read it feverishly: "If you want to see your daughter alive again, meet us tonight at the Renardière with your husband, and 300,000 euros. I advise you not to notify the police." Laurence felt her blood run cold.

Arriving at the villa located in the vicinity of Senlis, Laurence was first struck by the state of abandonment of the park. Then she noticed the "For Sale" sign, symbolising the failure of her marriage to Vincent. She knew, upon seeing the light in the vestibule, that her husband was already there. She hadn't seen him since that fateful evening when she had discovered he was cheating on her with his assistant. A few hours earlier, she had had to make an effort to dial the number of the ophthalmology clinic. Now, beyond the anxiety that had been gripping her since her daughter's disappearance, she felt immense apprehension at the thought of seeing the man she had once loved.

When she entered the living room, she saw Vincent, with his back to her, talking on the phone. He hung up just as she entered the room and turned towards her. He hadn't really changed, but seemed tired. Was it his mistress who was wearing him out to this extent? "Do you have the money?" she asked, to break the silence. "Yes, don't worry." Don't worry! He had nerve. Their daughter had been kidnapped, and that was all he had to say?

Laurence struggled to regain her composure. "The kidnapper found out that we just sold the villa, and he took advantage of it to demand a ransom," she said. Vincent, feeling uneasy, said nothing. She continued her thoughts. "But why did he give us a meeting here? The house is sold, you shouldn't have the keys anymore..." A doubt arose in Laurence's mind. "How did you get in?" Vincent came out of his reserve. "I kept a spare key! What else do you suspect me of?" She sighed. "There are many things I didn't think you were capable of..."

Their friendly conversation was interrupted by the ringing of the phone. Vincent picked it up, listened in silence for a few moments, then hung up. "It was the kidnapper," he said. "He wants to make sure the police aren't around before he contacts us again." Laurence felt her breath catch. "Don't tell me we're going to spend the night here!"

However, that's exactly what happened. The wait was unbearable. Fortunately, they hadn't alerted the police, as the kidnapper seemed to be on guard. According to Vincent, the voice on the phone was muffled, as if speaking through a scarf. It was impossible to tell if it was a man or a woman. "I sent you the divorce papers," Vincent said. "I know," she replied laconically. "Have you signed them?" he continued in a detached tone. "Not yet," she said with a tight

throat. "Are you so eager to remarry your assistant?" He looked at her strangely. "I don't see Melanie anymore... But what about you? You've surely found someone to keep you company..." She was not unhappy to see Vincent's jealousy, and decided not to disabuse him. "Do you think you're irreplaceable?"

Having gone through all the pleasantries that a divorcing couple can exchange, they eventually fell silent and Laurence, exhausted by all the emotions, soon dozed off in her armchair. A few hours later, a shrill noise jolted her out of a horrible nightmare. The kidnapper had taken on the appearance of Mélanie. Not content with stealing her husband, that bitch wanted to snatch her daughter, who was struggling and screaming at the top of her lungs.

Coming back to reality, Laurence realised it was the phone ringing. Vincent had just hung up the receiver. "It was him," he announced in a grave voice. "He wants us to drop the money on the edge of the well in the park." Laurence jumped up. "Let's do what he asks. To hell with his money, and let him give us our daughter back!" Vincent nodded without a word and took out a briefcase from under the couch that Laurence had not seen before. "I'll go alone, it's safer," he said in an oddly calm voice. As Vincent headed for the door, Laurence was once again seized by doubt. Something was wrong with the whole story. She went to Vincent, snatched the briefcase from him, and opened it. It was empty!

"That's what it was!" exclaimed Laurence, beside herself. "You kidnapped your own daughter to get half the money that was rightfully mine from the sale of the house..." Vincent lowered his eyes, visibly defeated, and pulled out a revolver from his pocket. Laurence took a step back. "No, Laurence. The truth is, I cancelled the sale of La Renardière at the last minute. I couldn't bring myself to sell that house where we were so happy as a family to a stranger. I was still hoping that you wouldn't sign the divorce papers... If I lied to you about the money, it was to keep you from panicking. I don't have the sum that the kidnapper is demanding." Vincent brandished the gun. "This is the only solution..." Something in Vincent's voice convinced Laurence that he was telling the truth. She went towards him and they hugged tightly. "Forgive me," she said. "It's you who should forgive me," he replied. "But now, we have to save our daughter." "I'm coming with you," she said firmly.

A few minutes later, Vincent and Laurence approached the place where they were to drop off the ransom. The sun was barely rising, and the fog was still thick. A few meters from the well, they saw a human shape. Vincent had the idea to shoot blindly in the direction of the kidnapper, but Laurence dissuaded him. By doing so, he would lose all hope of seeing their child again. They took a few more steps, holding hands tightly. The dramatic events they had faced together since the day before had brought them closer. That's when they saw the features of the frail silhouette waiting for them. Those of their daughter Léa... "It was the only way I could think of to be reunited with you," she confessed with an embarrassed smile.

16 – THE MYSTERY OF THE RED ROOM

Despite having seen all sorts of cases in my career, this seemingly ordinary affair was weighing heavily on my mind. I was facing a puzzle with only one missing piece left to complete the portrait of the culprit.

It all started when I was called in to investigate a jewellery theft from a luxury hotel on the Ile Saint-Louis in Paris. A wealthy client's room had been visited during the day and a pearl necklace worth tens of thousands of euros had been stolen. Clearly, the thief was either a member of the hotel staff or its clientele. Indeed, it was unlikely that a stranger could have entered the palace grounds without being immediately spotted. Furthermore, the lock on the room's door had not been forced.

I began by questioning the receptionist, a key witness in this larceny case, not to mention the number one suspect, as he held all the keys to the rooms and could have easily entered one of them to help himself. In addition, he was well placed to be aware of the comings and goings of the guests and could therefore have acted without fear of being disturbed. The man gave me his version of events. "When a client temporarily leaves the hotel, he leaves his key at reception," he explained. "I immediately hang it on the board."

I was observing with curiosity the rainbow painting located behind the receptionist. Anticipating my question, he gave me an explanation. "Each room in this hotel is named after a colour. There is the blue room, the yellow room, the pink room... The key to each room is identified by a keychain of the corresponding colour. And each keychain naturally finds its place on this multicoloured board. It's in the red room that the theft took place." I nodded my head dubiously. "Do you think it's possible that another hotel guest could have... taken that key without your knowledge, and put it back in its place after committing the crime?" The man hesitated before responding. "For the peace of mind of our guests, I would like to answer no. But honesty obliges me to admit that it is not impossible. I may occasionally step away from the reception for a moment to deal with a problem..." The man seemed to have more to say. So, I encouraged him to continue. "And on the afternoon when the theft occurred, did you notice anything unusual?" He hesitated again before letting out, "Around four o'clock, I left the reception for barely a minute to smoke a cigarette outside. Then again around five o'clock to use the restroom... I didn't notice anything the first time. But the second time, when I came back, I noticed that the key to the red room was hung in place of the one for the pink room. I didn't pay attention to it at the time, even though I never make that kind of mistake myself. I put it back in its place, that's all. But after what happened... Yes, it's possible that someone took the key to the red room during that time..."

The theft having taken place in the middle of the afternoon, this ruled out the chambermaids as suspects since they only had access to the rooms until two

o'clock. So the hotel guests remained to be questioned, starting with the occupant of the red room herself. This wealthy widow didn't need much persuasion to give me all the details of her misfortune. She stated that she had left the hotel at around half past two to visit a friend in Neuilly. At that time, she was certain that her necklace was still in her drawer, since she had hesitated to wear it before deciding not to. I pointed out to her that it was imprudent of her not to have placed such a valuable piece of jewellery in the hotel safe. She agreed, a little embarrassed. Although clearly the extent of her wealth allowed her not to make a fuss about the disappearance of this precious necklace, which her insurer might still reimburse her for, despite her negligence.

Now, all that remained for me was to question the other hotel guests, whom I received one by one in the comfortable lounge of this very exclusive establishment. To avoid offending its high-end clientele, the manager of the palace had expressly asked me to spare his guests the humiliation of an unnecessary summons to the police station. Unless, of course, there were very good reasons to suspect one of them.

I only had about ten more people to see, and a thick mystery still surrounded the case. That's when I finally found the missing piece to complete the puzzle. As soon as this rather elegant man sat opposite me on the deep lounge sofa, I was almost certain I had the culprit. A few questions were enough to confirm my suspicions and convince me of the need to take the man to the police station for further questioning right away.

It was a good thing I did, because further information on the suspect's identity, coupled with a twenty-four-hour detention, allowed me to easily obtain his confession.

"How did you figure out it was me?" the fraudster wondered. Feeling generous, I decided to satisfy his curiosity. "On the reception desk, the thief had placed the key to the red room instead of the key to the pink room. Perhaps because he was in a hurry... But perhaps also because he was colour-blind!" The man's eyes widened. "But then, how did you know I was colour-blind?" I couldn't help but smile. "As soon as you sat opposite me on the hotel sofa... and I caught a glimpse of your socks. They're not the same colour!"

17 - A ROSE IS A ROSE

Jean and André had always lived in two apartments with adjoining balconies, located on the sixth and top floor of a well-kept building in a working-class suburb in northern France. Although they had both worked in the same textile mill all their lives, they had never really become friends. And their relationship had not become any warmer since Jean's retirement a few years earlier.

To pass the time, Jean spent several hours a day on his balcony, taking care of the rosebush that his colleagues had given him at his retirement party at the mill. He watered it, pruned it, gave it fertiliser and insecticide, sprayed it with water to cool it down when it got too hot... And when the rosebush didn't need anything else, Jean even talked to it.

Unfortunately, the result of this constant attention was not up to the retired man's legitimate expectations. The rose bush remained small and weak. In the summer, it only produced one or two greyish roses that quickly wilted. And the previous year, its owner had even feared that it would not survive the winter. Jean did not know what else to do to revive his depressed rose bush, and this preoccupation, in the emptiness of his poor idle existence, took on extravagant proportions. To the point that Jean's wife, ignorant of the source of her husband's malaise, feared for his health.

It was in this gloomy context that one fine morning, Jean was surprised to see, on the neighbouring balcony, a potted rose bush that was identical to his own. He soon understood the significance of this unexpected event. Obviously, the colleagues at the mill, lacking any imagination, had given André the same retirement gift as Jean. However, Jean saw the arrival of this competing rose bush as a sort of provocation. He redoubled his care for his own plant. No way would this new rose bush surpass his own in size and vigour!

Realising that André, unlike him, was neglecting his flower, Jean felt a little reassured. However, he continued to discreetly observe what was happening on the neighbouring balcony. Every evening, just before dinner, André stuck his nose outside for a few minutes. He poured three drops of a mysterious liquid into a glass of water, which he then emptied into his rose pot. Then he invariably went back into his apartment, only to reappear the next day at the same time.

This behaviour obviously intrigued Jean, especially since soon André's rose, instead of withering as one might expect due to this lack of care, began to rapidly flourish. A few weeks later, it already surpassed Jean's in size and beauty. Before reaching the following summer in fantastic splendour Jean was sick with jealousy. He redoubled his efforts, consulted gardening books, and tested the most effective fertilisers. In vain. His rose languished, while the neighbour's literally exploded into a bouquet of roses of almost eerie magnificence.

Jean didn't know what else to do to regain the upper hand when one evening he noticed that André had forgotten the mysterious flask near his rosebush before going in for dinner. Dying of curiosity, Jean was already preparing to climb the railing that separated him from the neighbouring balcony at the risk of his life. He had to know the name of this magical elixir at all costs! Jean was interrupted in his rush by André's wife, who had just come outside. She grabbed the flask before observing, intrigued herself, the trace of moisture left in the pot's soil. Obviously upset, she immediately went back into the apartment, taking the flask with her, of course.

The next day at noon, as he returned from a specialty store where he had once again gone in search of the miracle fertiliser, whose flask would look like his neighbour's, Jean spotted a death notice on the entry table. His wife told him that the neighbour had died after falling from his balcony. Accident or suicide? Jean's wife hinted that the latter was more likely. "It was bound to happen," she commented. Since retiring, André had been depressed. His doctor had prescribed a psychotropic drug that he was supposed to take every day before dinner. But André's wife had discovered the day before that instead of taking his drops, her husband was pouring them into a flowerpot...

In the evening, melancholy, Jean noticed that the neighbour's rose bush had disappeared. Little consolation. Because his was still as moribund as ever. Besides, the neighbour's rose bush was soon to reappear. It was while attending André's funeral a few days later that Jean saw it, at the height of its glory, reigning over the deceased's tomb. The rose bush seemed to taunt him...

The day after the funeral, Jean's wife noticed that her husband didn't seem to be in great shape. She worried about his health, and he told her he was going to make an appointment with the doctor. A few days later, after a consultation with the same doctor who had already treated his neighbour, Jean left the neighbourhood pharmacy with a strange smile on his lips. He was holding the precious flask in his hand...

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theater groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (<https://comediatheque.net/>). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Plays by the same author translated in English:

A Cuckoo's nest

A simple business dinner

An innocent little murder

Casket for two

Cheaters

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but stable

Four stars

Friday the 13th

Him and Her

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

New Year's Eve at the Morgue

One marriage out of two

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

The Ideal Son-in-Law

The Window across the courtyard

The Worst Village in England

Welcome aboard!

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