


La Comédiathèque



*The Most
Beautiful
Village
in
France*

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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The Most Beautiful Village in France

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Any resemblance to an existing French village is purely coincidental.

Rocamor-le-Château is on the verge of being crowned The Most Beautiful Village in France. Meanwhile, the second round of local elections threatens to hand the mayor's office to a candidate from the Populist Front. At *La Part des Anges*, the village pub, the town's key figures are discussing who will win: the current mayor or his opponent. However, a series of unexpected events disrupts the election process, echoing Winston Churchill's famous assertion: *Democracy is the worst form of government—except for all the others.*

Characters:

Jacques Faucet: The incumbent mayor
Baronne de Heineken: His opponent
Marcel(le): Deputy mayor and real estate attorney
René(e): A broke artist
Maurice(tte): A boozy doctor
Charles: A nouveau riche Parisian
Dominique: A retired colonel
Ramirez: The municipal police officer
Sanchez: His deputy
Claude : The pub owner
Francine: A bourgeois Provençal woman
Brigitte: Her aspiring starlet daughter
Mario: The handyman

*The roles of the mayor and the baroness may be played by the same actor.
Marcel(le), René(e), Maurice(tte), Dominique, Ramirez, Sanchez, and Claude
can be played as male or female.*

Possible casting for 12 actors:

3M/9F, 4M/8F, 5M/7F, 6M/6F, 7M/5F, 8M/4F, 9M/3F

Possible casting for 13 actors:

3M/10F, 4M/9F, 5M/8F, 6M/7F, 7M/6F, 8M/5F, 9M/4F

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The terrace of a bistro, overshadowed by a sign reading La Part des Anges. A few tables surrounded by chairs, where Maurice, a somewhat tipsy local notable; René, an artistic type; and Dominique, with a martial bearing, are seated. The sound of cicadas hums softly in the background.

Maurice – It's quiet today.

René – Even the cicadas are singing less loudly than usual.

Dominique – The calm before the storm...

Maurice – It's true, it feels oppressive, doesn't it?

René – Oh yes, what heat!

Dominique – If only there were a bit of mistral.

René – The mistral is the poor man's air conditioning.

Maurice – What are you working on at the moment?

René – Hang on, let me check my thermometer. *(He pulls a medical thermometer from his pocket and glances at it.)* Ooh, 38.5! Looks like I'm on sick leave...

Maurice – If you've got a fever, you should see a doctor. Remember, I am one.

René – I was talking about the outdoor temperature. Cicadas start singing when it's over 25 degrees. I only start painting when it's below 22.

Dominique – He's even lazier than the cicada in the fable. At least she sang all summer.

René – What can I say? I'm a cicada that can't stand the heat.

Maurice – So why did you settle in the south?

René – Well, precisely to rest. Like Van Gogh.

Dominique – Van Gogh still managed to paint a few masterpieces while he was in the south.

René – It must have been cooler back then...

Maurice – It's true, this heat does make you thirsty.

They finish their drinks.

René *(calling towards the bistro)* – Madame Claude, could you top us up?

Claude, the landlady, with the air of a brothel madam, appears looking grumpy and refills their glasses.

Claude – Rosé with grapefruit?

They nod, and she refills their glasses.

Maurice – Not too much grapefruit for me—it gives me heartburn.

Claude – You're right, Doctor. Fruit juice is terrible for your health.

Maurice – But you know, wine is an excellent antioxidant.

Dominique – Then you must have the constitution of an ox.

The sound of cicadas suddenly stops.

Claude – Ah, the cicadas have stopped singing!

Maurice – Yes, it's cooling down.

Dominique (to René) – You can get back to work now.

René glances at his thermometer again.

René – It's still just as hot.

Claude – These cicadas are completely off their rocker. Just like the weather...

Maurice – Must be the pesticides.

René – Or maybe it's just their break time.

Claude – That's it, a cicada break. They've switched to a 35-hour work week. They're on flexitime.

Claude goes back inside the bistro. Charles, a polished Parisian on holiday, enters.

Charles – What a scorcher!

René – Yes, we were just saying the same thing.

Charles – So early in the morning. Not a day for working.

Maurice – Good thing you're retired then.

Charles – And you workers, how are you holding up? Not too hard, I hope?

Dominique – I'm retired too.

Charles – At your age, I wouldn't brag about it. And then we wonder why the NHS is bankrupt.

Dominique – I'm still a reserve colonel.

Charles – Well, knowing you'll spring into action if there's a third world war makes me feel so much safer.

Maurice – He's right. It's the old we should send to the front in case of war. A good war every now and then would solve the pension crisis.

René – Imagine the first world war with old men in walkers whacking each other with canes. That gives me an idea. Maybe I should paint a picture of that.

Charles (to René) – How about finishing the one I commissioned for above my fireplace first?

Dominique – What commission is this?

Charles – A reproduction of *Liberty Leading the People*.

Maurice – Wow... that's ambitious...

René – You're telling me... *(To Charles)* Wouldn't you prefer a simplified version?

Charles – I want a copy Delacroix himself could've signed.

Maurice – I didn't know you were such a staunch republican.

Dominique – Shows you can have a wealth tax and still be loyal to the Revolution's spirit.

Maurice – The original's at the Louvre, isn't it? What are you using as a model for your copy?

René pulls a Delacroix banknote from his pocket.

René – An old 100-franc note.

Maurice – Oh, I see... I understand Charles's passion for Delacroix better now. Nostalgia...

Dominique – True, back in the old franc days, the wealth tax hadn't been invented yet...

Charles – Anyway, I'd like it finished before winter!

René – Don't worry, it's nearly done.

Maurice – He just needs to apply the second coat.

René – But it's way too hot right now...

Charles – I'm a client, not a patron. And I already paid you an advance, remember?

René raises his glass.

René – And believe me, it's been put to excellent use.

He downs his glass in one go.

Charles – Between a Provençal artist who only paints in the cold, a doctor giving consultations at the bistro, and a colonel paid to twiddle his thumbs until the next war... France is in good hands. At least I've installed air conditioning at home. I'll be nice and cool this summer.

René – You're right. Heatwaves are deadly for the elderly.

Maurice – Back in 2003, it really was a massacre. All I got called for was signing death certificates.

René – Not much has changed since then...

Charles – On the other hand, if the mistral picks up, I'll have installed air conditioning for nothing. It doesn't exactly come cheap, you know.

Dominique – Air conditioning is like a nuclear weapon. Expensive to buy, but best if you never have to use it.

Madame Claude, the landlady, pokes her head out onto the terrace.

Claude – What can I get you?

Charles – What time is it?

Claude looks at her watch.

Claude – Time for rosé with grapefruit.

Charles – Alright, a rosé with grapefruit, then.

Maurice – You'll see, this parasite, living off our pay-as-you-go system, won't even buy a round...

Charles – The things one has to hear! It's not like your contributions are enough to pay for my pension.

Claude – Well?

Charles reluctantly hands her a large note.

Charles – I suppose you don't have change for a 500?

Claude – I do.

Charles – Oh well, never mind, then. A round for everyone. You never know, it might bring them back to life.

Claude – Or finish them off... Alright, rosé with grapefruit for everyone, then.

Claude takes the note and leaves. Charles sits down with the others. Dominique dives into the regional newspaper.

Maurice – You don't seem yourself. Another domestic issue?

Charles – It's my swimming pool.

René – What's wrong with your pool?

Charles – It's leaking.

Dominique – How can a pool leak?

Charles – I've no idea—that's the problem.

René – How did you realise it was leaking?

Charles – This morning, I went to take my usual dive, and there was no water in it.

Dominique – Lucky you noticed before jumping in.

Maurice – A pool is like a mistress: a lot of upkeep for how little you actually use it.

Dominique waves the newspaper.

Dominique – Have you seen this? Rocamor-le-Château is in the running for France's Most Beautiful Village!

Maurice – It's not a done deal yet.

Dominique – Still, we've made it to the final. (*Glances at the paper again.*) Two inspectors are arriving today to give their verdict before the jury announces the winner.

Charles – Ah... It's true, life's good in this little slice of paradise. Every morning, I take a deep breath as I open the window, thinking how, just a few months ago, I'd have been breathing in the smog of the ring road instead.

Claude returns with the glasses and sets them on the table.

Claude – Here you go...

Charles – There's a funny smell all of a sudden, isn't there?

René – Yes, like rotting cod.

Claude – Are you saying that about me?

René – It's Maurice's acid reflux. You're right, you should lay off the grapefruit juice.

Dominique – I think it's more likely the sewers backing up. Whenever it rains a bit in Rocamor, they overflow.

Charles – It hasn't rained in a month!

Dominique – In that case, we'll have to stop showering. At least until those inspectors leave.

Claude – Yes... And best not flush the loo either...

Claude heads back inside the café.

Charles – What a character, Madame Claude... She's quite something, isn't she?

Maurice – Definitely. Anyone visiting Rocamor has to meet her.

René – Apparently, she's even listed in the *Rough Guide* under “Worth a Detour.”

Charles – And with a name like that, you'd almost expect her to run a brothel.

The others exchange knowing smiles.

Maurice – Classic Charles...

Dominique – You can tell you're new around here.

René – You haven't yet explored all the charms of our little town.

Charles – No?

René – Let's just say she's semi-retired, like the colonel.

Maurice – But if needed, she's always ready to get back in action...

They laugh. Claude returns to clean a table, and they immediately regain their composure. Claude casts a suspicious glance at them before leaving. They clink glasses and finish their drinks

Charles – So, do you think the election is in the bag?

Maurice – Rocamor-le-Château is a beautiful village, no doubt about that.

Charles – I was talking about the municipal elections.

Maurice – Ah, well...

René – Will they really let France's Most Beautiful Village elect a Populist Front mayor?

Dominique – God won't let that happen...

Charles – Populist Front, you said?

René – The Left Front and the Right Front have joined forces to present a common list.

Dominique – After all, they already had the same programme, the same rhetoric, and the same voters.

Maurice – And almost the same name.

René (*grandiloquent*) – The vital forces of this small town must rally to prevent this infamy. Over my dead body will Rocamor be governed by those extremes that meet in the middle.

Dominique – On the other hand, voting this idiot...

Charles – Who?

Dominique – Jacques Faucet, the incumbent mayor.

Charles – Faucet...

René – A fitting name, don't you think?

Dominique – It's true. He managed to stay mayor by keeping everyone well watered.

René – Are you for the mayor or for the baroness?

Charles – The baroness?

René – The candidate from the Populist Front.

Maurice – Oh, I'm waiting to see how things play out.

Dominique – You're right. Never pick a side too quickly. That's how my grandfather ended up being shaved at the Liberation.

René – Your grandfather was involved with a German?

Maurice – Occupation was a rather murky period in French history.

René – And not one of the most glorious.

Brigitte enters, provocatively dressed, carrying a cleaning cloth to wipe the tables.

Dominique – That's Brigitte, Francine's daughter!

All the men's eyes turn to her.

Maurice – Brigitte, what are you doing in this den of iniquity?

René – Is this the only summer job you could find, darling? I thought you wanted to be an actress.

Brigitte – Exactly, my agent just landed me my first gig: a small role in a soap opera. I have to play a waitress in a bar in Marseille.

René – And that's why he sent you to train with Madame Claude?

Brigitte – Oh no, it's not what you think... I'm working on my character here.

Dominique – Ah, I see...

Brigitte – It's the Actors Studio method. You have to immerse yourself in the reality. Become the character.

Maurice – Well then... Good thing you're not playing a...

Brigitte – Playing a what?

Brigitte starts clearing glasses, leaning over the table suggestively.

René – A nun, for example. Can you imagine if you had to train at a convent to become your character? Not sure your mum would've agreed...

Maurice – Nor the Mother Superior, for that matter.

Mario enters, a ruggedly handsome man in grease-stained overalls.

Charles – Ah, Mario! *(To the others)* He's my mechanic...

Brigitte, seeing Mario, spills her tray.

René – You still need to work on your role—it's not quite there yet.

Charles – So, my good man, is my BMW ready?

Mario *(sitting apart)* – Almost, Monsieur Charles. Don't worry, I'm just waiting for the part to be delivered. *(To Brigitte)* I'll have a coffee, please.

Brigitte – Right away...

Brigitte goes into the bistro.

Charles – He's supposed to be an excellent mechanic. My real estate attorney recommended him.

Maurice – Your real estate attorney?

Charles – He works off the books and can get second-hand parts at unbeatable prices. I don't know how he does it...

René (*sarcastic*) – Yes, neither do we...

Charles – Do you know him?

Dominique – Super Mario? Of course we know him...

Mario glares at them menacingly, silencing further comments. Brigitte returns with Mario's coffee.

Mario – Thank you.

Brigitte smiles at him awkwardly. Claude comes out of the bistro and observes the interaction between Mario and Brigitte.

René – Hey, Brigitte, can we get another round, on the house?

Claude – Angels don't offer credit.

Maurice – That's what I thought...

Claude – Brigitte, why don't you go rehearse your role by doing the dishes? The sink's overflowing.

Brigitte goes back into the bistro, followed by Claude.

Charles – *La Part des Anges*—what does it mean, anyway?

Mario – You're not from around here, are you?

Charles – Sharp as ever. I'm from Paris.

Mario – In winemaking, it's the portion of liquid that evaporates during fermentation. Since no one knows where it goes, they call it the angels' share.

René – The same applies to politics, really.

Charles – Politics?

Maurice – The liquid that vanishes into thin air when things start heating up after elections. Exactly what happened with the outgoing municipal team...

Dominique – Like your pool, Charles. The water level drops, and no one knows where it's gone.

René – The angels' share... Clearly, it doesn't go to waste.

Maurice – Let's drink ours now before it vanishes.

René – Cheers to that.

They drain their glasses. The baroness de Heineken enters—a large, flamboyant figure in exaggerated makeup and an extravagant outfit.. The baroness can be played by a man in drag, such as the actor playing the mayor.

Dominique – Well, here comes the baroness herself.

Charles – The famous baroness de Heineken... Is she really a noble, or is it just the barrels of beer she puts away every day?

Dominique – The baroness comes from one of the great families of that tiny country, Belgium. I hear she's even related to the king.

Maurice – Which king?

René – The king of beer, maybe.

Baronne – Ah, my dear Mario, thank you for fixing my Ford Fiesta. Ever since you changed the engine, it feels like I'm driving a Jaguar.

Maurice – Who knows? Maybe he *did* put a Jaguar engine in it—if that's what he had in stock that day...

Baronne – Stop by the château later so I can settle up with you. In cash, as agreed...

Mario – Very well, Madame la Baronne.

Baronne – You haven't seen my dog, have you?

Charles – What kind of dog?

René – Like a pig, but smaller. It even has a curly tail.

Maurice – So, Madame la Baronne? Still campaigning?

Baronne – More than ever! Here, if you'd like to see the details of my programme...

She hands out some flyers to those present, including Claude, who has just arrived to take their order.

Claude (*reading*) – *Vote Heineken...* That's a slogan a lot of people can get behind. What can I get you, Madame la Baronne?

Baronne – I'll have a draught beer.

Claude – Heineken? Budweiser? (*The baroness shoots her a withering look.*) Just kidding.

Claude leaves.

Baronne – We can't let the current mayor get re-elected with such a disastrous record! Take security, for instance. A decent woman can't walk alone in this town after 6 p.m. without being propositioned in all sorts of ways...

Dominique – People proposition you? That never happens to me...

Baronne – And cleanliness! Do you smell the nauseating stench this corrupt administration has left behind? The sewers overflow, rats wander through the streets with impunity, and the mayor does nothing to clean up the mess!

Maurice – Not to mention the parking problems...

Baronne – People park wherever they please! I've even seen disabled people parking in non-designated spaces. And what does the council do about it? Nothing!

Dominique – Tackling anti-social behaviour is a must.

Baronne – If I'm elected mayor, I'll propose installing laser cameras all over the streets.

Dominique – Laser? For night vision?

Baronne – Laser, to instantly disintegrate offenders! I believe in zero tolerance!

Charles – That's rather... radical, don't you think?

Baronne – Let's face it, France no longer feels like home...

René – But you're Belgian, aren't you? At least by origin...

Claude returns with the baroness' beer.

Baronne – A Belgian baroness feels at home wherever there's beer, chips, and a château. No, I was talking about all those Rastafarian non-EU types. *(To Mario)* I don't mean you, Mario. You may work off the books, but at least you work. So, has anyone seen my little dog?

Claude – Don't worry about her. She's probably gone back to the château on her own—she knows the way.

René – And honestly, who'd want to steal a dog that looks like a pig?

Maurice – Just follow her trail, like Tom Thumb! Track her by the droppings she's surely left behind.

René – It's amazing, isn't it? How a dog the size of a piglet can leave such enormous droppings.

Baronne – You're right, I'll go and check over there... Antoinette! Antoinette!

Charles – Her dog's name is Antoinette?

René – No, it's a nickname. Her full name is Marie-Antoinette.

The baroness leaves.

Charles – So, who exactly is this baroness?

Maurice – From what we know, she's a tax refugee who recently arrived from Wallonia. She applied for and obtained French citizenship.

René – You'd have to be Belgian to apply for asylum in France for tax reasons...

Charles – Do many Belgians live around here?

Dominique – There are truffle hotspots, and then there's this—Belgian hotspots.

René – She's the one who bought Rocamor's château.

Dominique – I almost bought it myself. The council used its right of pre-emption to block me and the next day, it was sold to the baroness.

Charles – A baroness and a châtelaine... And she's representing the Populist Front?

Dominique – Believe it or not, she's a left-wing royalist.

Charles – I don't think I've quite grasped the subtleties of local politics yet...

Mario – This is the South, Monsieur Charles... The South.

Mario, who has been almost forgotten, stands to leave, catching everyone's attention.

René – In Rocamor-le-Château, there are only two classes: half pay the wealth tax, and the other half receive social welfare.

Maurice – A perfect symbol of our town's charming spirit of openness and fraternity, transcending all social and cultural divides.

René – Though, inevitably, it does cause a bit of tension now and then...

Dominique – Look at this article in the paper. A brawl after a rock concert in Rocamor-le-Château. I say, we should just ban rock concerts altogether.

Maurice – It's true; you rarely see trouble after a classical music concert.

Brigitte returns and locks eyes with Mario, who is about to leave. In an overly dramatic slow-motion sequence, accompanied by melodramatic music, they approach each other, stare deeply, and kiss passionately as everyone else looks on in stunned silence.

Dominique – Do you think she's rehearsing her role for that soap opera again?

René – This looks more like *Beauty and the Beast*...

The baroness rushes back in, panicked. Mario and Brigitte leave together.

Baronne – My dog's been kidnapped!

Maurice – Maybe the pound took her.

Baronne – I found an envelope in my letterbox... with one of Antoinette's ears inside!

Claude – Oh my God! An ear? Like Van Gogh!

Dominique – Van Gogh was never kidnapped.

Maurice – Yes, and it's unlikely your dog cut off her own ear and sent it to you.

René – And why would a dog do that? A painter, maybe, but a dog?

Baronne – I'm telling you, it's a kidnapping! There was a letter in the envelope with the ear. They're demanding I withdraw my candidacy from the municipal elections.

Charles – No!

Baronne – The incumbent mayor's team is trying to get to me by targeting the being I hold dearest in the world: my dog!

Maurice – Oh, come now! It's probably just a prank. Med school students pull stunts like this all the time. I remember, back when I was a student, we left a...

Dominique (*interrupting*) – But are you sure it's really your dog's ear?

Baronne – They're trying to silence me, but I'm ready to do whatever it takes to save local democracy. I'll go to the end, no matter the cost. (*Theatrically*) I pledge myself to Rocamor-le-Château!

The baroness leaves. René, Maurice, Dominique, and Charles remain silent for a moment.

Dominique – Do you think the mayor ordered this kidnapping?

The others exchange puzzled looks. Francine, an elegant bourgeois woman, arrives.

Francine – Good morning, good morning.

René – Ah, good morning, Francine! Bertrand's not with you?

Francine – Uh... no.

René – He's making a mistake! When you're married to such a beautiful woman, you don't let her walk around alone, even in daylight.

Claude comes over to take their orders.

Claude – What can I get you?

Dominique – How are you, Francine? By the way, your daughter Brigitte just left with a gentleman... You didn't happen to run into her, did you?

Francine – No. Gosh, it's warm today, isn't it?

René – You know Charles, don't you?

Charles – I haven't had the pleasure of meeting Madame yet. I'm sure I'd remember...

Charles and Francine exchange polite glances; Francine looks visibly flattered by the compliment.

René (*introducing them*) – Francine de la Chatelière, Charles Benamou. You'd make a splendid couple... The discreet charm of the provincial bourgeoisie fallen on hard luck... and the slightly vulgar affluence of the nouveau riche Parisian.

Maurice – Charles has air conditioning and a swimming pool that costs him more than a mistress.

Francine – Only because he hasn't met a mistress worth it yet.

Charles and Francine exchange another complicit look.

Claude (*raising her voice*) – What can I get you?

Francine – Lovely to meet you, Charles. Have you just moved to our charming little town?

Charles – Yes, I'm new here...

Claude – What can I get you?

René – Despite appearances, Charles is a man of taste—he appreciates my paintings. He's a patron of the arts and a generous benefactor.

Charles – Let's just say I'm a collector... and an investor.

Claude (*shouting*) – What can I get you?

Everyone looks startled.

Francine – I... I'll have tea. What kinds do you have?

Claude – Lipton.

Francine – Alright, tea it is. With a slice of lemon, please.

Claude heads into the bistro. Francine's phone rings, cutting through the silence. She answers.

Francine – Yes, hello, Francine de la Chatelière speaking. I called earlier about... (*to the others*) Excuse me for just a moment...

Francine steps into the bistro to take her call in private.

Maurice – I've got some bad news to share. Strictly confidential, of course...

Dominique – We'll be silent as the grave.

Maurice – Francine's husband has had a stroke.

René – Bertrand? When did this happen?

Maurice – He's been in the hospital since last night.

Dominique – If her husband passes, she won't stay long in that big house alone with her daughter...

Maurice – Bertrand was already struggling to manage it. I mean, the house... and his wife, in a way.

René – So, are you thinking about buying a house?

Dominique – Depends... (*to Maurice*) Was it a serious stroke?

Maurice – No stroke is ever trivial.

Charles – Still, she'd make a stunning widow, no question about it...

René – Might I remind you, you're married too?

Dominique – There's a garden, isn't there?

Charles – Oh yes! It's not very large, but it's definitely a lovely garden.

René – Houses with gardens in the town centre are rare.

Maurice – Yes, I might be interested too. If the price is reasonable...

Dominique – Oh no! I'm not getting outbid again—not after missing out on the château!

Francine returns.

Dominique – Everything alright?

Francine – Just some family troubles...

Dominique – Yes, we're aware.

Francine – Oh, really? (*Maurice shoots a reproachful look at Dominique.*) Do you think it's serious, Doctor?

Maurice – Well... I don't have the file. It depends on how quickly he was treated...

Francine – Oh no, I wasn't talking about Bertrand. I just spoke with the hospital; I think he'll recover, though there might be a little facial paralysis.

Dominique – That's a relief.

Francine – No, I was talking about my daughter. Believe it or not, she's been seeing the Virgin Mary.

René – The Virgin?

Francine – Yes, the Virgin. The Virgin Mary!

Claude arrives with Francine's tea and places it on the table.

Claude – Brigitte sees the Virgin?

Francine – Do you think I should talk to someone, Doctor?

Maurice – Well...

Francine – And about her pageant, I'm not sure what to do. What do you think?

Maurice – Which pageant?

Francine – She's entering the Miss Provence competition. Do you think she should mention in her application that she sees the Virgin?

René – That could actually be a plus.

Maurice – If Rocamor doesn't win Most Beautiful Village in France, we could always turn it into a pilgrimage site...

Ramirez and Sanchez enter, looking like the Blues Brothers.

Dominique – Who are these clowns? I've never seen them around here before.

René – Maybe they're the jury members for the contest...

Francine – The Miss Provence contest?

Dominique – The Most Beautiful Village in France contest!

Maurice – They're probably here undercover...

Ramirez and Sanchez sit at a table.

Dominique – Good day, gentlemen, and welcome to our charming village. The proprietor of this humble establishment will surely be delighted to offer you a welcome drink.

Claude shoots Dominique a fiery glare. The two men exchange cautious glances, then nod.

Ramirez – Well, why not?

René – It's tradition. Rocamor-le-Château is known for its warm hospitality.

Claude – Fine... Rosé with grapefruit, like everyone else?

Sanchez – Never while on duty.

Ramirez – Well, just this once, we'll bend the rules to avoid seeming impolite. A small rosé for me, a grapefruit juice for my deputy.

Sanchez grimaces but says nothing.

Maurice – You're about to discover all the treasures this village holds—not to mention the natural charm of its residents.

René – Believe it or not, even Belgians are drawn here by the gentle climate and reasonable taxes.

Maurice – Rocamor has always welcomed other cultures—as long as they don't stray too far from ours...

Claude serves the drinks.

Ramirez – Thank you!

Sanchez – Such a welcome is always appreciated. In our line of work, as you know, we don't have many friends.

Charles – So, what will you start with? The château?

Ramirez – Oh, you know, we're just at the beginning of our investigation.

Marcelle enters, looking every bit the go-getter, with her phone glued to her ear.

Marcelle – Yes... Yes, Mr Mayor... Of course, Mr Mayor...

Maurice – Looking to buy a holiday home around here? Marcelle's the one to talk to. As a real estate attorney and deputy mayor, she knows all the best deals in our little community.

Dominique – And she's also the one who issues building permits...

René – Very convenient—you'll see. Rocamor-le-Château pioneered the one-stop shop concept before anyone else.

Charles – She can even recommend an honest plumber—or a mechanic who works off the books, if needed.

Marcelle puts away her phone.

Marcelle – So? Have you met the two new recruits for our municipal police force, recently established to ensure our residents' peace of mind?

René – A municipal police force?

Ramirez – Chief Officer Ramirez, and this is my deputy, Sanchez.

Marcelle – Top-notch, believe me. They were with the National Police but had to resign after a... mishap.

Sanchez – We're investigating the disappearance of the baroness's dog.

Ramirez – We're not ruling out the possibility that she orchestrated it herself to discredit the incumbent mayor...

Sanchez's phone rings, and he answers.

Sanchez – Yes... No? Affirmative... I'll report back. (*He hangs up.*) The baroness has just received the other ear and the tail of her dog.

Marcelle – My God, that's horrifying!

Ramirez – Both ears and the tail... That's quite something.

Dominique – Poor Antoinette. At this rate, they'll cut off her head next.

Marcelle – Gentlemen, we won't keep you any longer. This poor animal is a citizen too, like any other, and deserves the protection of our new municipal police force, of which you are the spearhead.

Ramirez – You can count on us, Madame Deputy Mayor.

Marcelle – Ah, and here comes the mayor himself.

Jacques Faucet enters, dressed like a cowboy, complete with moccasins, a Stetson, and Ray-Bans. Whether he's played by the same actor as the baroness is up to the director.

Mayor – Good day, gentlemen. (*To Ramirez and Sanchez*) We haven't had the pleasure of meeting yet. I'm Jacques Faucet, mayor of this peaceful little town.

Ramirez – My respects, Mr Mayor. Sanchez, are you going to finish your grapefruit juice?

Sanchez – Yes, yes...

Ramirez and Sanchez leave.

Mayor (*to Claude*) – Madame Claude, serve the same for these gentlemen and put it on my personal tab.

Claude – You mean the town's tab?

Mayor – When you're mayor, you're on duty 24/7, aren't you? There's no such thing as a personal life. So how could I have a personal tab that's different from the town's? My friends, I can count on your support in this election, can't I?

Charles – We'll see... What's your platform?

Mayor – You're new here, aren't you? But a good candidate doesn't need a platform—no more than a great general needs a map. Right, Colonel? A good mayor knows what needs to be done.

Dominique – Of course, Mr Mayor.

Mayor – And you all know you can count on me. Take the Most Beautiful Village in France contest, for example. Who got Rocamor-le-Château to the finals? That's right, I did.

René – But the contest isn't over yet.

Mayor – Vote for Jacques Faucet, and I'm telling you—it's practically a done deal. The jury is meeting at a venue in Marseille where I also have connections. Right, Madame Claude? A jury is like a flower bed. You have to water it well to see good results. On that note, I must leave. Duty calls.

He leaves.

Maurice – He seems to be in a hurry.

Marcelle – Yes, so am I. I need to get back to the town hall to hold the fort. Imagine, I'm officiating my first same-sex wedding today...

René – The mayor didn't want to handle it himself?

Charles – That's a bad look for him. Personally, I'd never vote for a candidate who doesn't commit to respecting the rights of all minorities.

Marcelle – Oh, no, no... I can assure you your mayor is fully in favour of marriage for all.

Charles – Then?

Marcelle – Let's just say he had a little scheduling conflict.

Charles – Right, of course...

Marcelle – Alright, let's say it was a major scheduling conflict. (*Lowering her voice*) He had to check in for his court-ordered supervision. Anyway, I've got to run. Love waits for no one...

Marcelle leaves.

Charles – Do you think the mayor still has a chance of winning?

Maurice – As long as he doesn't land back in prison before then.

Charles – What exactly is he accused of?

Dominique – They call it passive corruption these days. Back in my time, we just called it bribery.

René – He doesn't wait for the angels' share—he takes it straight from the barrel.

A screech of tyres is followed by the sound of a collision.

Dominique – People drive like maniacs. Did you know Provence has the highest accident rate in France?

Maurice – Probably, another accident on Plane Tree Avenue. Even though there's a solid white line.

René – The only white lines the youth respect around here are lines of coke.

Maurice's phone rings.

Maurice – Yes? No! Really? Alright, I'm on my way.

Dominique – It's not about Bertrand, is it? We're all worried about his health...

Maurice – It's about the baroness.

René – The baroness?

Maurice – She's been in a car accident.

Dominique – Is it serious?

Maurice – According to the new sheriff and his deputy, her Ford Fiesta looks like a César sculpture. The only thing sticking out of the wreckage is her handbag.

Francine – Oh my God! With all these reckless drivers! I'm always worried about my daughter when she's on the road. I only hope the Virgin is watching over her...

Maurice – Anyway, I've got to go. They're waiting for me to sign the death certificate.

Dominique – Already? Well, they're not wasting any time.

Maurice leaves.

Claude – Just goes to show—baroness or not, we're all dust in the wind.

Claude heads back into the bistro.

René – Hey, Charles, I think I know the answer, but could you lend me a little more cash? It's, uh, for a wreath for the late Madame la Baronne...

Charles – Of course, sure...

René – Well, if there's no other way... I guess I'd better get to work myself.

Charles – You do that...

Francine – I'd better visit my husband at the hospital, see if he needs clean socks or anything...

Dominique – Mind if I tag along? I'd like to get a better sense of his condition. Did I mention I'm looking to buy a house in Rocamor? Preferably one with a garden...

Charles – I'm off too. Need to sort out my leak... And I haven't voted yet.

René and Charles go one way, while Dominique and Francine head in the opposite direction. Ramirez returns with Marcelle.

Marcelle – What a mess...

Ramirez – Have you managed to reach the mayor to inform him?

Marcelle – Not yet. He's not picking up.

Ramirez – It's probably just a routine accident, but people will talk. They'll say the timing is awfully convenient for the incumbent...

Marcelle – No doubt about it. He's rid of his main rival in the election, and it didn't cost him a cent.

Ramirez – Do you think the Baroness might have been assassinated, like Princess Diana?

Marcelle – Either way, this sudden death will look suspicious when it's time for the funeral. You'd better clear this up quickly, Ramirez, if you want to keep your position as sheriff here.

Ramirez – The coroner is currently performing an autopsy on the remains embedded that Jaguar's engine...

Marcelle – A Jaguar? But the baroness's car was a Ford Fiesta!

Ramirez – The engine that went through her torso was definitely from a Jaguar. A V6 engine at full throttle really does a number on a hunk of flesh.

Marcelle – But surely someone was able to identify her? Didn't she have kids or something?

Ramirez – You'd have better luck asking a calf to recognise its mother in a pile of ground beef.

Francine returns, and Marcelle intercepts her.

Marcelle – Ah, Francine, I've been thinking about what you said regarding your daughter Brigitte. If we could turn this town into a pilgrimage site like Lourdes, it would be fantastic for the local businesses—the backbone of our voter base.

Francine – Do you think so? I wouldn't want to traumatise the poor girl... But if it's good for business...

Marcelle – Only, we'd need to present a serious case to the Holy See to authenticate these apparitions. Forgive me for asking, Francine, but... in today's world, are you sure Brigitte isn't on drugs?

Francine – Honestly, I don't think so. I mean, I share a little joint with her now and then, just to stay relevant, but nothing hallucinogenic, I assure you.

Marcelle – And... she doesn't have a tendency toward storytelling, does she?

Francine – You think my daughter's a liar, don't you? Alright, she's not baptised, but she is enrolled in a Catholic school.

Marcelle – You know how it is at that age. Youthful exaltation. They think they're seeing the Virgin, but it turns out to be Taylor Swift o Madonna. And where exactly did she see this Virgin?

Francine – On her iPhone.

Marcelle – Her iPhone?

Francine – She was scrolling through TikTok, and out of nowhere, the Virgin Mary appeared on her screen

Marcelle – An apparition of the Virgin on TikTok. I'm not sure the Vatican would certify that. Are you sure it's not a glitch? What do you think, Ramirez?

Ramirez – We'd need your daughter to give us a precise description of the Virgin she saw. We'll create a sketch and run it by the village priest. He's probably the most qualified person to identify a Virgin online.

Marcelle – Well, we might have to wait. Apparently, the priest was quite close to the baroness... if you know what I mean. He must be quite shaken by her passing.

Ramirez – Don't worry, we'll handle this with tact.

Marcelle – And your daughter... does she perform miracles, by any chance?

Francine – Not at school, at least... Is that really necessary?

Marcelle – Let's say it would help. A saint without miracles is like a doctor who doesn't issue sick notes—what's the point?

Sanchez arrives with Maurice, who is wearing a bloodstained white coat.

Ramirez – Ah, here's the coroner with the preliminary autopsy results...

Marcelle – Maurice?

Ramirez – The certified coroner is on holiday in the Seychelles, so we've requisitioned the village doctor. Thought it best to keep it in the family, don't you think?

Francine – I need to get back to the hospital. They've told me my husband just had a second stroke. The doctors said the third one might be the charm...

Marcelle – I hate to push, but if your daughter Brigitte could visit him too... You never know, miracles do happen.

Francine – I wouldn't get your hopes up. He's already paralyzed on the right side.

Marcelle – All it would take is a small miracle...

Francine – I'll see what I can do.

Sanchez – The doctor has something to tell you, and let me warn you—it's big.

Marcelle – We're listening, Doctor. Speak freely.

Maurice (*to Francine*) – Well, Francine, normally this would be covered by doctor-patient confidentiality, but since we're all here, searching for the truth... your daughter is pregnant.

Marcelle – What does that have to do with our investigation?

Maurice – How should I know? Isn't that for Starsky and Hutch over here to figure out?

Sanchez – I was talking about the analysis of the accident victim...

Francine – But who's the father?

Marcelle – Maybe the investigation will tell us, Francine. But for now, this is classified information.

Francine leaves. All eyes turn to Maurice.

Marcelle – Well?

Maurice – Oh, right, sorry... Here's the thing: only one body was found in the wrecked vehicle, and the analysis leaves no doubt—it's not human.

Marcelle – Don't tell me an alien was driving the baroness's car. The only invaders we have here don't come from Mars or Venus, I assure you.

Maurice – No, don't worry, it's not extraterrestrial. What I meant was... the victim of this accident was a dog.

Ramirez – A dog? But Doctor, a dog can't drive a Ford Fiesta!

Sanchez – Well, that might explain the accident.

Ramirez – This is a very strange case... Have you managed to identify the dog, Sanchez?

Sanchez – I checked the database, chief. It's not a dog known to the police.

Marcelle – Do you think it could be the baroness's dog?

Sanchez – I don't think so. This dog had both ears and a tail...

Ramirez – But the baroness's dog's ears and tail were mailed to her.

Marcelle – Follow me inside, I need a drink.

Ramirez – Yes, me too. (*Sanchez moves to follow them.*) Sanchez, stay with the doctor and figure out if there's a way to identify the dog. It might not have had a seatbelt, but it could have had a collar.

Sanchez leaves with Maurice. Ramirez and Marcelle enter the bistro. René shows up, carrying a painting under his arm.

René – Ah, Charles, I've finished your painting.

Charles – Already?

René – A moment of inspiration... It just came to me, like a vision of the Virgin Mary.

Charles (*examining the painting, which depicts a Madonna and Child*) – This isn't at all what I ordered...

René – No, but it's much better!

Charles looks at the painting again.

Charles – I have to admit, it's your best work in ages. But religious subjects aren't usually your thing...

René – I must be getting more spiritual in my old age.

Charles – And the dimensions... I'm not sure it'll fit above my fireplace.

René – So, are you taking it or not? It's completely original—not some copy of an old master! Given how few paintings I'll have created in my lifetime, you know this will be worth a fortune once I'm dead! Rarity drives up the price...

Charles – Alright, I'll take it.

Charles prepares to leave with the painting.

René – And my payment?

Charles – Can I write you a cheque?

René – I'd prefer cash...

Charles – In that case, I'll need to stop by the bank.

René – Fine, I'm counting on you. Trust me, it's a great deal.

Charles leaves. Dominique returns.

René – So, how's Bertrand?

Dominique – Better... unfortunately.

René – You mean fortunately, I assume...

Dominique – Isn't that what I said?

René – You're going to have to find another house to buy, then.

Dominique – By the way, did you know the baroness sold her château as a life estate?

René – No, who told you that?

Dominique – Her attorney told me.

René – Marcelle?

Dominique – Sold as a life estate—can you imagine?

René – But to whom?

Dominique – Marcelle wouldn't tell me. Professional secrecy, apparently. Still, with the baroness's death, it makes you wonder who benefits from the crime. Have you voted yet?

René – Not yet. I'll come with you.

They leave. Ramirez and Marcelle exit the bistro.

Marcelle – The mayor hasn't returned from his judicial check-in yet. I'm starting to worry...

Ramirez – Maybe they decided to keep him there.

Sanchez arrives.

Ramirez – Any news, Sanchez?

Sanchez – The butcher analyzed the ears and tail of the baroness's dog from the envelope.

Marcelle – The butcher?

Ramirez – I told you, the coroner is on holiday, and since the vet wasn't available either, we had to requisition Rocamor's Halal butcher.

Marcelle – And?

Sanchez – The results are conclusive: the ears and tail belong to a pig.

Marcelle – For heaven's sake! So the baroness's dog was actually a pig?

Ramirez – Or the ears and tail in the envelope weren't from the baroness's dog at all.

Sanchez – Which, incidentally, was confirmed dead—at the wheel of a Ford Fiesta fitted with a Jaguar engine.

Marcelle – This case keeps getting stranger... What do you make of it, Ramirez?

Ramirez – Maybe the baroness was the real target of the accident, and her dog was just an innocent victim. And what if this attempt on the baroness had nothing to do with her candidacy?

Marcelle – So the kidnapping of the baroness's dog was just a diversion?

Ramirez – Could this botched attack on the baroness be linked to the life estate sale of her château?

Marcelle – But that doesn't tell us where the baroness is...

Sanchez – Or maybe she did die in the accident, and her body was made to disappear.

Marcelle – But why?

Sanchez – Or what if the body simply vanished?

Marcelle – How?

Ramirez – Another unanswered question...

Sanchez – Her car was her tomb... but the tomb is empty.

Sanchez's phone rings.

Sanchez – Yes? Very well, thank you. (*He puts his phone away.*) I issued a witness appeal, and we just got our first lead. Someone claims to have seen the baroness in a brothel in Marseille.

Marcelle – So she's alive! (*Turns to Ramirez.*) You look thoughtful, Ramirez. If you have an idea that could help this investigation, now's the time to share it.

Ramirez – Doesn't this story of an empty tomb and someone reappearing days ring a bell?

Marcelle – Honestly, no...

Ramirez – The resurrection of Christ!

Marcelle – Hmm... It could be related to Brigitte seeing the Virgin.

Sanchez – Maybe the baroness is a saint, sent to Rocamor-le-Château to drive invaders out of the Most Beautiful Village in France.

Marcelle – *The Maid of Rocamor*. That could sell a lot of souvenirs, T-shirts, and keychains.

Claude – Yes, well... Jesus Christ didn't exactly reappear in a brothel, did he?

Sanchez's phone rings again.

Sanchez – Yes? No? Really? (*He puts his phone away.*) There's been a development. The baroness has been found—thrown several metres from the accident. She was embedded in a plane tree, which is why she wasn't spotted immediately.

Marcelle – Is it serious?

Sanchez – The tree was already rotten, so it didn't survive the impact.

Marcelle – I meant the baroness!

Sanchez – Oh, yes, of course. The firefighters are currently extracting her. But sadly, it seems she succumbed—just like the tree did.

Claude – At least her loved ones will have closure.

Sanchez – It's true. It's rare to not find a body in a road accident.

Marcelle glances at her phone.

Marcelle – The mayor is still missing. I sent a message to the station where he was supposed to report. They just replied—he never showed up for his judicial supervision.

Claude – Maybe he's on the run...

Ramirez – A voluntary disappearance to evade justice? It's possible. Because if he went to trial, it's unlikely he'd be released anytime soon.

They all enter the bistro. Mario and Brigitte arrive.

Brigitte – I need to go practice my role... So, what do we do?

Mario – Do you love me?

Brigitte – Enough to be pregnant, but not enough to be sure you're the father.

Mario – Then I'll ask your mother for your hand in marriage.

Brigitte – I doubt she'll be thrilled. She's been trying to set me up with her bank manager hoping he'll turn a blind eye to her overdrafts. Why don't you just kidnap me? That would be more romantic.

Mario – Don't worry, my princess. I'll give you the castle you deserve.

Brigitte – A castle? I'd rather have some jewellery...

Mario – You're my jewel. And a princess belongs in a castle, right?

They exchange a kiss. Mario leaves. Bernadette enters the bistro. Marcelle exits the bistro with Ramirez.

Marcelle – I've just got the first-round results: the incumbent mayor is in a runoff. And the baroness is in the lead.

Ramirez – The baroness's death puts the mayor back in play.

Marcelle – It certainly clears a path for him in the second round.

Ramirez – If we find him before then...

Marcelle – Otherwise, it's a power vacuum at the top of the village.

Ramirez – A recipe for chaos...

Charles arrives, distraught.

Charles – My wife is dead!

Ramirez – Was she in the car as well?

Charles – I forgot to warn her about the leak. She jumped into the pool while it was empty...

Ramirez – Listen, my good man, you have our sympathies. But don't you think we have more pressing matters to deal with right now?

Marcelle – The future of Rocamor is at stake. Dare I say it—the fate of democracy itself!

Francine arrives.

Charles – Ah, Francine! I'm glad to see you. Guess what? I'm a widower...

Francine – Well, that's amusing. I'm a widow too. My husband choked on a zero-percent-sugar applesauce at the hospital.

Marcelle – Choking on applesauce while recovering from his third heart attack... That's practically a miracle.

Claude briefly appears.

Claude – Though it'll be tough to certify.

Marcelle and Ramirez re-enter the bistro. Mario arrives.

Francine – Ah, Mario, you'll need to stop by my place. I've got a leak.

Charles – Like my pool...

Mario – Alright, you can count on me.

Charles – I didn't know Mario did plumbing as well?

Francine – This young man can do anything, believe me. If he weren't Romanian, he'd be the perfect son-in-law.

Mario – Actually, I wanted to ask you something...

Charles (*cutting him off*) – Francine, let me just dive right in—hoping I don't hit the bottom. Are you free tonight?

Francine – Tonight and every other night, Charles! As I said, I've been a widow for barely an hour... You're just the man I need to fill my overdraft...

Charles and Francine leave. René arrives.

Mario – Got my money?

René – I'll have it later, I promise...

Mario – I don't do credit. A deal's a deal.

René – I swear, today for sure. I'm expecting a big payday. And in the meantime, I trust in your discretion...

Mario – If I don't have the money by tonight, I'll spill it all...

Mario and René leave. Maurice arrives as Marcelle and Ramirez exit the bistro.

Maurice – Ah, just the people I was looking for...

Marcelle – Do you have news, Doctor?

Maurice – Oh yes, you could say that...

Marcelle – Well, let's hear it.

Maurice – The firefighters managed to extract the body embedded in the plane tree, and I conducted a preliminary examination.

Ramirez – Alright, spill the beans.

Maurice – The victim had both ears... and a tail.

Marcelle – I'm not sure I follow, Doctor...

Ramirez – I think I do, and I'm scared to be right.

Maurice – The baroness... was actually a baron.

Ramirez – The Baroness... a drag queen?

Marcelle – Oh my God! In a way, it's a good thing she's dead. She came out on top in the first round. Can you imagine? The Most Beautiful Village in France, with a Belgian baroness in drag as its mayor?

Ramirez – Well, let's go take a look...

They exit. René and Dominique arrive.

René – I heard Francine's husband passed away...

Dominique – Yes, it's very sad.

René – Do you think she'll sell the house?

Dominique – I'm planning to make her an offer.

René – And to think you were the last person to see Bertrand alive...

Dominique – Yes... I even gave him his last meal.

René – Which clearly didn't go down well...

Dominique – Sometimes there are seeds left in the applesauce.

Francine arrives, distraught. Claude steps out of the bistro.

Claude – We heard about your husband...

Dominique – Yes, our condolences.

Francine – Oh, yes, of course...

Dominique – You look upset. Is there something else?

Francine – I just found out my daughter is pregnant.

Claude – A pregnant contestant? That's going to complicate the Miss Provence pageant...

Dominique – And the pilgrimage, too...

Claude – Some days, nothing goes right.

Dominique – Do you know who the father is?

Francine – She says she has no idea.

Claude – Well, it's definitely not the Holy Spirit.

Dominique – Let me walk you home, my dear... I'll use the chance to take another look at the house. It'll feel awfully big now that your husband is gone.

Francine – Yes... But now that Brigitte is a single mother, we'll need a room for the baby...

Dominique – Damn, I hadn't thought of that. We need to find out who the father is, and quickly.

They leave. Claude re-enters the bistro. Marcelle, Ramirez, and Sanchez arrive.

Marcelle – I almost don't want to ask, but... any news?

Sanchez – Sadly, yes.

Ramirez – The municipal road services analysed the DNA of the victim found in the plane tree.

Marcelle – And?

Ramirez – I think you'd better sit down.

Marcelle sits.

Sanchez – It's the mayor's DNA.

Marcelle (*stunned*) – Could you explain a bit more?

Sanchez – The mayor was driving the baroness's car, and he's the one who died in the crash.

Marcelle – That doesn't explain why he was dressed as the baroness, though...

Ramirez – You're right. Every time we make progress, the mystery only deepens...

Sanchez – So it's the mayor who's dead, not the baroness.

Marcelle – Which means we'll have the baroness as our mayor since her opponent in the runoff is now deceased!

Ramirez – The good news is, the baroness might not be a drag queen after all.

Marcelle – But that still doesn't explain where she is now...

They leave. René arrives with Charles, who is holding the painting. Claude steps out.

René – Got my money?

Charles – Yes, yes, I'll give it to you now.

Claude – What is this eyesore?

Charles – It's a painting by René. I'm going to have it framed.

René – Why? Do you know anything about art?

Claude – In my line of work, you meet all sorts of people. My grandmother ran a brothel and had some of the greatest painters of her time as clients.

Charles (*impressed*) – Your grandmother slept with the Impressionists?

René – Next, she'll be claiming she's Van Gogh's illegitimate granddaughter...

Claude examines the painting.

Claude – I can tell you this painting dates back to the early 20th century.

Charles – Which century?

Claude – Not the 21st, that's for sure.

Charles casts a suspicious look at René.

René – Come on, you're talking nonsense! I painted this!

Claude – The only fresh paint on this is René's signature.

Charles glares at René.

Charles – Should I get it appraised?

René – Alright, fine. I bought this junk from Mario for 50 euros. No idea where he got it.

Charles hands the painting back.

Charles – Lucky for you, I hadn't paid you yet.

René – Are you sure you don't want to keep it? It's the perfect size for your fireplace!

Charles glares again.

Charles – Consider yourself lucky I'm not pressing charges. I wouldn't be surprised if it's stolen.

René – Fine, I'll get back to working on *Liberty Leading the People*.

Charles leaves. Mario arrives.

Mario – Got my money?

René – No, but I'm giving the painting back. My buyer backed out...

René hands the painting to Mario and leaves.

Claude – Mind if I take a closer look at this masterpiece?

Claude takes the painting into the bistro. Marcelle returns with Ramirez.

Ramirez – And for the mayor? Have you planned a proper tribute?

Marcelle – We'll give him a municipal funeral. Hopefully, he'll get a posthumous Legion of Honour, and everyone will forget his legal troubles.

Ramirez shows the newspaper.

Ramirez – A little balm for these wounds... Have you seen this? Rocamor's been elected the Most Beautiful Village in France!

Marcelle – The jury met at the Hôtel Martinez, and with Madame Claude and her starlets' help, the outgoing mayor made sure the election was full of joy and goodwill.

Dominique returns.

Dominique – I hate to dampen the mood, but the baroness's disappearance casts suspicion on whoever bought her château in the life estate deal...

Marcelle – I already told you, I only arranged the sale by proxy.

Dominique – But you're refusing to reveal the buyer's identity?

Marcelle – What are you implying?

Dominique – You could have bought the château for yourself...

Marcelle steps toward Dominique, menacingly.

Marcelle – I told you that's not the case!

Dominique – And with the two main candidates for mayor gone...

Marcelle – What now?

Dominique – If there's a new election, the Deputy Mayor would be in a strong position to win...

Marcelle and Dominique are about to come to blows.

Ramirez – True, that gives you at least two motives... *(His phone rings.)* Yes? Right. I'll let her know.

Marcelle stops confronting Dominique, now eager to hear what Ramirez has to say.

Marcelle – I'm afraid to hear what you're about to tell me...

Ramirez – The municipal cultural office compared the DNA of the mayor and the baroness, as well as their theatre season passes.

Marcelle – And?

Ramirez – The mayor and the baroness are one and the same person.

Marcelle – You're kidding, right? Nothing surprises me anymore.

Dominique – I think I'm starting to understand...

Marcelle – I'm completely lost.

Sanchez – The baroness was just a disguise for the mayor.

Ramirez – A double, of sorts.

Marcelle – The mayor and the baroness? You mean... like Doctor Mabuse and Mister Hyde?

Ramirez – Since the mayor's only opponent was the baroness, he was guaranteed to win under one or the other of his identities.

Sanchez – And under one or the other of his political banners.

Marcelle – Truly a unity candidacy... bridging all political and, dare I say, personal divides.

Ramirez – Unfortunately, both the mayor and the baroness died in the accident since they were two sides of the same coin.

Dominique – And Rocamor-le-Château now has no mayor at all.

The mayor enters, preceded by an out-of-breath Maurice, and followed by Charles, René, and Mario. The mayor is half-dressed as the baroness, his appearance somewhat dishevelled from the accident.

Maurice – I may have been too quick in issuing the death certificate... The mayor only briefly lost consciousness from the impact.

Mayor – Rest assured, I'm alive and well. Everything can return to normal. Your mayor is here; nothing serious can happen to you now.

Dominique – I think you owe us a few explanations.

Mayor – Alright, I admit it—I messed up. Yes, I am the Baronne de Heineken.

Charles – So, you're admitting it?

Mayor – I created the baroness to unify the opposition votes. She was supposed to disappear between the two rounds, playing her role as an electoral diversion, leaving me free to be re-elected. Unfortunately, as you know, things didn't go as planned...

Dominique – And what about the life estate deal? Who bought the château?

Mayor – It was Mario.

Everyone turns to look at Mario.

Ramirez – Mario?

Mayor – He was supposed to be a straw man. I would have reclaimed the château after the baroness “disappeared.”

Ramirez – A château bought with the proceeds of your corrupt dealings, I imagine.

Sanchez – A clever way to launder the angels' share.

Marcelle – But then the accident happened.

Ramirez – Who knows if the car was tampered with? By eliminating the mayor, Mario could keep the château...

Mario – And that's exactly what I'm going to do. Otherwise, I'll spill everything to the press. You hear me?

René – Honestly, with a story like this, it would make a great boulevard comedy.

Ramirez – If everyone agrees, I think it's best to find a good arrangement and close the matter.

Sanchez – A good deal is often better than a bad trial.

Mayor – We can't tarnish the reputation of the Most Beautiful Village in France. After all, no one died.

Marcelle – Fine. The baroness is declared the winner, and we leave it at that.

Mayor – The baroness? What do you mean, the baroness? My plan was to make her disappear...

Marcelle – I'd advise you not to push your luck, Mayor. The death notices have already been sent out for you.

Maurice – And what are you complaining about? You'll have a grand funeral!

René – Maybe even a statue in the village square. Like you died a hero during the war!

Dominique – We could start a subscription drive. You were quite popular in life, and the dead always benefit from positive bias.

Mayor – So, I have to stay dressed as the baroness for the rest of my life?

Maurice – At least until the end of your term.

Ramirez – Look on the bright side. This way, you avoid legal prosecution.

Sanchez – You'll get a fresh start, so to speak.

Mayor – But politically, I'll have to switch sides!

Marcelle – It wouldn't be the first time you've changed sides, would it? You've already changed sexes—this is just another change.

Francine enters from one side and Brigitte from the other.

Francine – Ah, Brigitte, darling!

Brigitte – Mum, I think Mario has something to tell you...

Mario – Madame, I would like to officially ask for your daughter's hand in marriage.

Brigitte – In all likelihood, he's the father of my child.

Dominique – Unless it's someone from the jury for the Most Beautiful Village in France...

Mario – Either way, you're going to be a grandmother, Francine.

Francine – Grandmother? Don't be rude.

Mario – I should mention that I now own the château of Rocamor.

Marcelle – The baroness isn't dead yet, but I'm sure, in the spirit of reconciliation, she'll grant you usufruct rights.

Francine – The château? Really?

Claude emerges from the bistro holding the painting.

Claude – I scratched off some of the paint and found another painting beneath this crust!

Charles – And?

Claude – You won't believe it.

Marcelle – At this point, nothing surprises us anymore...

Claude – It's signed Van Gogh!

René – Well, he did stay in the area once.

Charles – If this canvas is authenticated, it'll be worth a fortune.

Charles approaches the painting, but Mario steps in.

Mario – Let me remind you, this painting is mine. You didn't want it, remember?

Francine – I've always said this young man was the perfect son-in-law. Very well, we'll celebrate the wedding at the château of Rocamor, and the entire village will be invited!

Marcelle – The mayor herself will officiate, won't you, Madame la Baronne?

The happy couple kisses. Wedding music plays.

Maurice – The union of welfare and wealth tax...

René – Another way to resolve class struggles in the Most Beautiful Village in France.

Blackout.

The Virgin Mary appears in a slideshow.

Blackout.

The End

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 theatre 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.

Other plays by the same author translated in English

Comedies for 2

EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman,
one giant leap backward for
Mankind
The Way of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
How to get rid of your best
friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the
audience?
Just a moment before the end of
the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore
Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police
Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police
Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana
Abbey
Music does not always soothe
the savage beasts
Neighbours'Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not
cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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