

La Comédiathèque

Such a lovely village

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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Such a Lovely Village

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Tomorrow, the village of Casteljarnac will disappear beneath the waters of a reservoir. All its residents have been evacuated. The living... and the dead. But then a macabre discovery revives suspicions about a mysterious affair everyone believed had been buried for ever. On the eve of its disappearance, the village has clearly not yet revealed all its secrets...

Flexible casting:

Louis/Louise: the village mayor
Dominique: the deputy mayor
Claude: the owner of the village café
François: the village priest
Maxime: a farmer
Alex: the funeral director
Sacha: the dam project manager
Fred: a journalist, male or female

Possible casts:

3M/5F, 4M/4F, 5M/3F, 6M/2F, 7M/1F, 8M

*With the exception of the project manager and the priest, who are male,
all the roles may be played by either a man or a woman.*

In this version, all the flexible-casting roles are played by women.

The village café in Casteljarnac. Behind the bar, Claude, the landlady, is polishing glasses and staring into space. She is a woman in her sixties, with a slightly masculine air. Father François, leaning on the bar, finishes his glass of red wine.

Claude – Another one, Father?

François – Go on, then...

Claude – Believe me, it's better than your Mass wine...

François – How would you know? I never see you at Mass...

Claude – If I went to church, who would mind the bar?

François – You have a point. We divide the work between us, in a way. I look after the good Christians, and you look after the lost sheep...

Claude fills the priest's glass.

Claude – Well, at least the Krauts won't be getting that.

François – The Krauts?

Claude – The company building the dam! It's a German company, apparently.

François – Apparently...? Give a dog a bad name and hang him...

Claude – Yeah, well, this particular dog is a German shepherd, I'm telling you...

François – German or not... What difference does it make?

Claude – The last time the Germans came here was in 1940. They didn't manage to burn the village down as they retreated... Now they're going to drown it under millions of gallons of water!

François – It's all very sad. But you weren't at any of the meetings either. And you didn't sign the petition...

Claude – Me? I can't afford to fall out with half my customers. So I'm like the Swiss. I'm neutral. That doesn't stop me having an opinion...

A pause.

François – What are you going to do now?

Claude – I've run this café all my life... I can't see myself starting again from scratch. They paid me decent compensation. I might as well retire. I'm old enough now...

François – Then you'll have time to come to Mass...

Claude – Not in your new church, anyway.

François – You're not going to settle in our new village?

Claude – I've lived here all my life. I can't see myself moving ten kilometres away to some brand-new village with the same name as this one. No, I don't think I'll be staying in the area.

François – I can understand that...

Claude – As for going to Mass... The Church hasn't always been very kindly disposed towards women like me...

François – Women like you...?

Dominique, the deputy mayor, enters. She is smartly dressed but rather prim, and her age is difficult to place.

Dominique – Hello, Claude. Father...

Claude – Madam Deputy Mayor...

Dominique – Am I the first?

Claude – Well, no, because I'm already here. And so is Father François...

Dominique – Sorry. I meant...

Claude – Oh, I know. I'm part of the furniture.

Dominique – I'd say you were more of a monument, Claude.

Claude – Yes, a listed monument. A masterpiece at risk, even.

François – Like our poor church...

Dominique – You're this village's living memory, Claude. And so are you, Father François.

Claude – A memory that's already fairly unreliable... and will soon be wiped out altogether.

Dominique – It's true that you must have heard all sorts of things over the years too, Claude.

Claude – Oh yes, you've no idea... But like Father François, I'm bound by the seal of confession. What can I get you, Dominique?

Dominique – A pastis. Not too much water.

Claude – Water... In a few days' time, the whole village will be drowned in it, like a glass of pastis... And you can't exactly say the council has done much to prevent it...

Dominique – That's not true, Claude. And it's a little harsh of you to say that...

Claude – Thirty years ago, the mayor managed to save the village.

Dominique – It was a different era. Oil was flowing freely. The coal mines were running at full capacity. Nowadays, with global warming, energy policy has changed...

Claude – So we're just supposed to stand by and say nothing while our village is wiped off the map?

Dominique – Environmentalists used to accuse the government of doing nothing to reduce carbon emissions... Now that drastic measures are being taken to cut them, we're accused of endangering certain protected species.

Claude – Protected species...? And who's protecting us?

Dominique – If a few villages have to be sacrificed to save the planet...

François – And a listed twelfth-century church has to be blown up...?

Dominique – We weren't given a choice, as you well know. The decision came from the very top.

Claude – Yes... Even higher up than your boss, Father.

François – Well, if it's to save the planet...

Claude – And I'm sure some people will do very nicely out of it, as usual.

Dominique – That's an unfair accusation, Claude. Don't you start too...

François – Quite... I thought you were neutral.

Claude – In a few days' time, this café will be serving nothing but water to the carp and pike. Do you really think I'm still worried about losing customers?

Louise, the mayor, enters. She is a woman in her thirties with an air of aristocratic elegance.

Claude – Ah, Madam Mayor. We were just talking about you...

Louise – Hello, everyone... I was hoping there would be a few more of us at this final meeting... But I can understand that some people couldn't face coming.

Claude – A council meeting in a café to mark the disappearance of the village isn't exactly an everyday occurrence.

Louise – It isn't an actual council meeting. Unfortunately, all the decisions have already been made... It's more of a...

Maxime, a farmer in her thirties or forties, enters.

Maxime – A farewell drink?

François – Hello, Maxime.

Louise – Besides, the village isn't really dying. Casteljarnac will continue to exist.

Claude (*ironically*) – Yes... As... Casteljarnac-le-Haut. Upper Casteljarnac.

Maxime – Upper Casteljarnac... How imaginative...

Dominique – May I remind you that the village's new name was debated and approved by the council.

François – I would have preferred Casteljarnac-Saint-Sauveur, Casteljarnac Saint Saviour, since that's the name of our church, but I was told it wasn't secular enough.

Claude – Besides, Saint Saviour, as the name of a village replacing one that's about to disappear beneath a reservoir... Some people might have found that rather ironic.

Maxime – Yes, we're a long way from *Moses Saved from the Water*...

François – In a way, the village has still been saved, since it will be reborn a little further upstream...

Claude (*ironically*) – Yeah, you could almost call it a miracle...

Maxime – There's still time to rename it... Casteljarnac-le-Très-Haut. Casteljarnac the Most High.

Louise – Your parish won't disappear either, Father. They've built you a brand-new church. And the same bells will ring in the new bell tower.

Maxime – Right... So, since everything's already been decided, why exactly are we here? All the residents have been evacuated. Tomorrow, every building will be demolished, and whatever remains of the village will disappear beneath the water.

Louise – I know you were opposed to the project, Maxime. So was I at first, as you well know.

Maxime – All my farmland lies around the village. It'll be flooded along with it. Good land, cultivated by my father before me, which has produced wonderful fruit for centuries...

Louise – I'm fully aware of how traumatic this is for you... and for many others.

Maxime – But by some miracle, your land happens to be further upstream...

Dominique – So what?

Maxime – In a few weeks' time, instead of ending up under water, it'll be on the shores of a lake... It's already doubled in value, and who knows? Tomorrow, with a simple decision from the mayor, meaning you, it might suddenly be rezoned for development...

Louise – Are you suggesting that I supported this project out of self-interest?

Maxime – What we do know is that you started buying that land long before the new dam project was made public. Either you have remarkably good instincts, or you had access to privileged information before everyone else. And in that case, that would be a serious abuse of inside information.

François – Come now, my children, let's calm down! No one wanted this village to disappear.

Louise – My father, who also happened to be my predecessor as mayor, saved the village from being flooded some thirty years ago. My family has no lessons to take from yours on that score, Maxime.

Dominique – We won a battle back then. Unfortunately, we've just lost the war. So now, rather than wasting our energy fighting a rearguard action, what matters is saving whatever can still be saved and looking to the future.

Maxime – And our future is to live on a brand-new housing estate, while a village steeped in history, our village, the village of our ancestors, is wiped off the map?

Dominique – We're simply complying with a court ruling.

Louise – A ruling which, because of our determined opposition, went all the way to the highest administrative court. We exhausted every possible avenue of appeal. So those who were in favour and those who were against... There's no point drawing that distinction any longer. We must all come together now and manage this painful transition as best we can...

Sacha, the dam project manager, enters. He is a fit-looking man in his sixties. Everyone present looks slightly surprised.

Sacha – Hello, everyone...

Maxime – Speak of the devil...

Louise – Hello, Sacha. Thank you for accepting our invitation. You didn't have to come...

Sacha – I didn't want to shirk my responsibilities.

Claude – As they say... The murderer always returns to the scene of the crime. Even if the victim managed to escape you the first time, isn't that right, Mr Nerval...?

Dominique – I detect a certain amount of subtext in that remark...

Sacha – When the first dam was planned, I was already involved in the preliminary studies, as a young engineer.

Claude – And now you're the project manager...

Sacha – That was thirty years ago... Either I haven't changed, which would be very flattering, or you have an excellent memory for faces.

Claude – I run a café... You used to come in here regularly. I remember you always had lemonade with grenadine. What can I get you?

Sacha – The same again...

Claude searches for something behind the bar.

Maxime – Lemonade with grenadine.... At least you've managed to preserve your inner child...

Claude – Don't tell me that, even as a boy, you already dreamt of drowning the whole world, like God during the Flood...?

Sacha – I'm prepared to answer any questions you may still have. (*An awkward pause.*) But if my presence isn't welcome, I'd understand that too. You only have to say the word...

Maxime – I have to admit, you're not short of courage. Or sheer nerve, depending on your point of view... But now that you're here...

Claude – Sorry, I've run out of grenadine. And lemonade. So what will it be?

Maxime – Champagne...?

Sacha – Fruit juice. Whatever you've got...

Claude – Apple juice...? It's from a small local producer...

Claude serves him a glass of apple juice.

Maxime – I'm the small local producer.

Sacha – I gathered that.

Maxime – Make the most of it. You won't get another chance.

Dominique – That's enough, Maxime. This gentleman isn't responsible for any of this. He may be the project manager, but he doesn't make the political decisions.

Maxime – You'll still be the one who lights the fuse on the dynamite and opens the floodgates and submerge the ruins of our village for good.

Sacha – Not personally, but... yes, I'll be the one who gives the order. I'll take no pleasure in it, but I accept responsibility for it. This dam will generate enough electricity to supply a town of fifty thousand people, with an almost negligible carbon footprint. We must all join forces to combat global warming, which is threatening the future of our planet. And to do that, we'll all have to make sacrifices.

Maxime – But some of us will have to make greater sacrifices than others.

Dominique – That's what is known as the common good.

Maxime – The common good... means that ordinary people always end up paying for the mess made by the powerful. I'm only a small organic farmer. I went solar and electric years ago. I've done my bit to save the planet. Your boss, on the other hand, ran TotalEnergies before taking charge of the German group you work for. Is that true or isn't it?

Sacha – It's true.

Maxime – He spent his whole life promoting fossil fuels, and now he's reinvented himself as a champion of hydropower and clean energy. Why? Because that's where the biggest profits will be in the years ahead. Stop pretending to be a hero, Mr Nerval. You're not here to save the world. You're here to protect your shareholders' dividends.

Sacha – This may surprise you, but... I agree with you. Unfortunately, we have to be realistic. Dreamers aren't going to save the planet. For environmentalism to be taken seriously, it had to become profitable. That is now the case, and that can only be a good thing...

Fred enters. She is a woman in her thirties, dressed somewhat eccentrically.

Fred – Hello, everyone... I hope I'm not interrupting...

The mayor looks surprised.

Louise – That depends... Who are you?

Fred – Fred Valberg, a journalist with *Libération*.

Claude – *Libération*...? Is that still going?

Louise – I don't recall inviting the press...

She turns reproachfully towards her deputy.

Dominique – I had nothing to do with it, I assure you...

Maxime – She contacted me a few days ago, in my capacity as the councillor responsible for communications... I was the one who asked her to come.

Louise – You could have mentioned it to us...

Maxime – I thought it was important to have an outside witness here to report on this farewell ceremony. After all, it is our village we are burying today... This tragic event should be documented by a professional, so that future generations will know what really happened here...

Fred – I know this is a difficult time for all of you. Don't worry, I'll be discreet.

Claude – A discreet journalist... Now that would be something new...

Fred – Please, just pretend I'm not here.

Louise chooses to ignore Fred and resumes her conversation with Sacha.

Louise – We all know you're doing everything you can to ensure that things go as smoothly as possible, Sacha... and we're grateful. So where do matters stand?

Sacha – Everything is ready for the reservoir to be filled. All the architectural features and significant objects that could be transported have been moved to a safe place.

François – Including the church bells, the stained-glass windows and the paintings...

Louise – And Charles's statue?

Fred looks surprised.

Fred – Charles de Gaulle?

Maxime – Charles de La Mare. Louise's father and her predecessor as mayor. He didn't save France, but... he did save our village from an earlier plan to flood it about thirty years ago...

Sacha – The statue and its plinth will be moved first thing tomorrow morning.

Louise – And have all the residents definitely been evacuated?

Sacha – Absolutely... All the living, at any rate...

Fred – The living?

François – We're not going to let our dead be buried beneath the water a second time. The graves must also be opened and the bodies transferred to the new cemetery in Casteljarnac-le-Haut.

Fred – Wow... This really is *Night of the Living Dead*...

Dominique – It's a good thing you promised to be discreet...

Louise – The funeral directors are handling that delicate operation. Incidentally, where do things stand on that front?

Dominique – The funeral director rang me earlier. She wanted to join our meeting to tell us about a problem.

Louise – A problem? What kind of problem?

Dominique – She didn't say. She wanted to tell us in person. Ah, here she is now...

Alex, the funeral director, enters. She is a woman in her forties, dressed in austere, formal clothes.

Louise – Ah, Mrs Bontemps... We weren't expecting to see you here this evening...

Maxime – Then again, since we've come to say a final farewell to our village, the presence of a funeral director seems entirely appropriate.

Alex – Good evening, everyone, and... on behalf of Bontemps Funeral Directors, please accept my deepest condolences.

François – Your condolences...?

Alex – Sorry, force of habit. I meant...

Louise – I believe you know everyone...

Alex – I'm working closely with Mr Nerval on the transfer of the remains. And as far as our village is concerned, I think I can say that I know every family here. You know, sooner or later, everyone needs our services...

Louise – Of course... And... I believe you wanted to tell us about a small problem...

Alex – Yes... A... small problem.

Louise – Go on...

Alex – Could I speak to you privately for a moment, Madam Mayor?

Maxime – At this stage, I don't think there's any reason left to conceal important information from the public. So no whispering behind closed doors.

François – Sadly, what could possibly be worse than what's happening to us today...?

Alex – Unfortunately, in my line of work... experience has taught me that even when you think you've hit rock bottom, you can always sink lower. You only have to keep digging...

The others remain silent for a moment, taken aback by this unexpected remark.

Maxime – Digging...?

Louise – You may speak, Mrs Bontemps. We're listening.

Alex – Well... I have some good news and some bad news...

Dominique – Could you spare us the tired cliché, Mrs Bontemps...? Please, just get to the point.

Claude – Although, coming from an undertaker, the words “good news” do rather make one curious...

Alex – As you know, we are responsible for transferring the remains from our old cemetery to the cemetery in the new village.

Dominique – Yes, you've already told us that several times...

Louise – And you have successfully completed that delicate operation, Mrs Bontemps. I assume that was the good news.

Alex – Up to now, everything has gone smoothly, yes. But...

François – But...?

Alex – We have just encountered an unforeseen difficulty.

Louise – Don't tell me one of our dearly departed is missing...

Alex – Actually... it's rather the opposite.

Maxime – The opposite?

Alex – If the official records are correct... we appear to have one body too many.

General astonishment.

Fred – I'm beginning to think I was right to come after all...

Sacha – One body too many?

Alex – Human remains... which are not listed in any of the cemetery records.

An uneasy silence.

Fred – Strangely, none of you seems particularly surprised...

Dominique – It is a very old cemetery, after all. Isn't that right, Father?

François – The church dates from the Middle Ages. And the cemetery is probably even older.

Dominique – It's hardly surprising that there isn't an exact record of everyone buried there over more than a thousand years...

Alex – Certainly, but in this case... the body was found beneath the floor slab of a relatively recent vault. Which suggests that the burial itself was also recent.

Sacha – A vault? A family vault, then.

Alex – Yes.

Maxime – But which family?

Alex turns towards Louise.

Alex – It is... the de La Mare family vault, Madam Mayor.

Louise is visibly shaken.

Claude – Ah, now... This is beginning to sound like the start of a detective novel...

Fred – Or a horror film... I think our readers are going to find this very interesting...

Dominique – For the time being, all this must remain strictly confidential, agreed?

Silence.

Maxime – You're not saying anything, Madam Mayor...

Louise – I'm in shock, just like the rest of you.

Fred – But... it is your family vault, after all. You had no idea?

Louise – Of course not! I believe the vault was built around fifty years ago...

Alex – Fifty-three, to be precise.

Louise – Only my paternal grandparents and my father were buried there, as far as I'm aware.

Alex – That is indeed what the records show... In fact, if the work involved in transferring the vault had not been undertaken, this unmarked burial would probably have remained undiscovered for ever.

Claude – It's true that, strangely enough... a cemetery is the last place anyone thinks of looking for the body of a missing person...

Maxime – Yes... For a murderer, when you think about it, it's the perfect place to hide a victim's body.

Sacha – So, if I understand correctly, these remains were buried without any legal authorisation.

Alex – Yes, evidently.

Fred – Are you absolutely certain?

Alex – I checked. Our firm built the vault, back when my father was in charge. If a body had already been there at the time, we would have discovered it while digging the foundations.

Sacha – Indeed. That is unfortunate.

Maxime – Unfortunate...?

Sacha – From a strictly practical point of view, it could delay the completion of the project.

Maxime – I understand that all you can think about is filling your reservoir, but this macabre discovery has much wider implications, doesn't it?

Dominique – Certainly...

Maxime – I mean... A body has been discovered. Buried in secret no more than fifty years ago. Perhaps much more recently.

Alex – From what we could see, the person does not appear to have died recently. But that would obviously be for forensic experts to determine...

Sacha – In any case, where there's a body, there's probably a crime, isn't there? I mean... if no doctor issued a death certificate and no death was registered at the town hall...

Maxime – That seems obvious to me. Why conceal a body if you have nothing to hide?

Alex – For the moment, all we have are unidentified human remains. As the funeral director responsible for transferring the remains, it was my duty to report this irregularity. But that is where my remit ends. It is for the police, if they are called in, to examine the evidence and conduct an investigation.

Fred – If the matter is referred to them? But... how could it possibly not be?

Sacha – It's true that this discovery raises a number of questions.

Maxime – Who is this person?

Claude – How did they die?

Sacha – When?

Maxime – If it was a crime, who killed them? And why?

Alex – Of course... My only duty is to warn you that, if an investigation is opened, then yes, it will delay the filling of the reservoir.

Sacha – Undoubtedly...

Alex – This cemetery will become a crime scene. There will be further excavations. Forensic examinations. Tests...

A pause.

Dominique – So, this body has surfaced at precisely the right moment for those opposed to the dam.

Maxime – What exactly are you implying?

Dominique – What if this were a last-minute attempt to delay the project?

Maxime – Right... So an unidentified body is found hidden in the de La Mare family vault, and you're suggesting this is some kind of set-up by opponents of the dam? Let's not reverse the roles, please! For the moment, you're the one under scrutiny, Madam Mayor.

Louise – I beg your pardon?

Maxime – It is your family vault, isn't it?

Alex – Let's not get carried away, please. At the moment, we know nothing for certain. But it is true that the discovery of these bones raises questions.

Sacha – Questions that will have to be answered quickly, because time is running out...

Maxime – What is there to discuss? We call the police, and that's that.

Dominique – All right, all right... There's no need to panic! If you'll forgive the expression... Those bones have been there for decades. Surely we can take a few minutes to discuss the matter.

Maxime – So you're suggesting we say nothing? And let this body lie at the bottom of the reservoir without anyone ever knowing?

Claude – No one... except us.

Maxime – But our silence would make us complicit in a crime!

Alex – Assuming there was a crime...

A pause.

Dominique – Forgive me for insisting, Mrs Bontemps, but... are you quite sure they're human bones?

Claude – What else could they be?

Dominique – I don't know... An animal...

Claude – An animal?

Maxime – You mean... a dog, or...

Claude – Why not a gorilla while you're at it?

Maxime – That would certainly suit you better, wouldn't it?

Alex – Believe me, Madam Deputy Mayor, I've been doing this job for twenty years, and although I'm no forensic specialist, I know what a human skeleton looks like...

Maxime – An ape... It's absurd... Why would Mr de La Mare have buried an ape in his family vault?

Claude – Although... Apparently Léo Ferré had a female chimpanzee that he brought up like a daughter. When she died, he had her buried in the grounds of his château.

François – Well, I think we can reasonably rule out that possibility. Everyone knows that Mr de La Mare never brought up his daughter like an ape.

Louise – Excuse me...?

François – I mean... an ape as his daughter. Oh, now you've got me completely muddled!

Dominique – I was only asking, that's all... So it definitely is a human body...

Alex – Judging by the size of the skeleton, the shape of the skull and, above all, the pelvis, I think I can say that it was probably a woman.

Louise – A woman...? And would you have any idea how old she was...?

Alex – I wouldn't want to be too specific, but... judging by the condition of the teeth and the wear on the bones, she was neither very young nor elderly. I would say she was between thirty and forty.

Fred – Right, a woman in her thirties... That's quite a precise estimate...

Alex – Naturally, since this could be a crime scene, I touched nothing after making this macabre discovery. I was therefore only able to carry out a visual examination.

Silence.

Fred – There is one thing that strikes me as odd. For the past few minutes, some of you have seemed rather uncomfortable. Isn't that right, Father...?

The priest does indeed look uneasy.

François – You must understand that my position requires a certain discretion...

Fred – Your position also means that people confide all sorts of things in you...

François – If I did know anything, and I'm not saying that I do, it would still be protected by the seal of confession...

Maxime – A seal that doesn't entitle you to cover up a crime.

Fred – And what about you, Claude?

Claude – Me...? I'm like Father François. As a landlady, I'm bound by professional secrecy.

Fred – Even those of you who have said something don't seem particularly surprised by this macabre discovery. Am I wrong? (*Another awkward silence.*) Madam Mayor...?

Louise – There have always been rumours, that's true...

Dominique – Rumours intended to tarnish the reputation of Charles de La Mare, who, let me remind you, has a statue in the square outside the town hall as the saviour of our village.

Maxime – A statue erected by his daughter.

Louise – With your full approval, Maxime. The council voted unanimously in favour of paying tribute to my father.

Sacha – Rumours? What rumours?

Louise – As a public figure, my father had many enemies. Most of them were among those who supported the construction of the dam and hoped to make a fortune from the generous compensation payments promised by the government.

Maxime – And?

Louise – While Charles de La Mare was leading the campaign against that first project, a campaign he eventually won, his wife left him.

Fred – His wife... Your mother, then...

Louise – Yes... My mother... Although I've always found it rather difficult to call her that.

Fred – And... why, if you don't mind me asking...?

Louise – I have no real memory of her. I was three months old when she left.

Sacha – Do you have any idea why she disappeared so suddenly?

Louise – She felt neglected, I suppose... For my father, that campaign had become his life's work. A genuine crusade.

Fred – And how did your mother feel about it?

Louise – My mother wasn't from here. She was Romanian...

Fred – Was...? You're already speaking about her in the past tense...

Louise – After she disappeared, we always spoke about her in the past tense at home... Although, in truth, it was a subject everyone did their best to avoid.

Fred – What was your mother's name?

Louise – Marina. Her name was Marina. That's about all I know about her...

Fred – Apart from the fact that she was Romanian...

Louise – My father met her during a visit to Romania. Our village is twinned with a Romanian village on the Black Sea coast. Marina was his interpreter. She spoke perfect French. Six months after they met, she moved here to be with him, and they married.

Fred – So it was a love match...

Louise – Perhaps it was also a way for her to leave her country and find a better life. She was about fifteen years younger than him.

Fred – And then?

Louise – They say that during a visit to Paris, she took a lover. Another Romanian. And that she ran away with him.

Dominique – Abandoning her husband... and her only daughter. You, Louise...

Louise – I was only a baby... I have no clear memories of it. But of course, later on, I came to see it as abandonment... So I did everything I could to forget her...

Sacha – But you can't simply forget your mother...

Louise – When I was little, without telling anyone, least of all my father, I kept hoping she would come back.

Fred – But she never did...

Louise – No.

Sacha – And you never heard from her?

Louise – Never. So little by little... I came to terms with losing my mother. It's true... I behaved as though she were dead. In fact, at school, whenever my friends asked me about her, I said she had died. It was simpler. For me. For everyone else. It stopped people asking any more questions. Naturally, I never discussed it with my father.

Fred – Why not?

Louise – I assumed it was painful for him too. I thought he had told me everything he knew and that there was no point reopening old wounds.

Fred – So you had to deal with it all on your own...

Louise – My father was quite authoritarian. He didn't say much. Not at home, anyway. He was kind to me, but he wasn't a very affectionate man. Not with me, or with anyone else. I think everyone here knows that.

Louise appears rather shaken.

Maxime – I understand that it can't have been easy for you. But right now, we have a problem...

Sacha – And an urgent one...

Fred – A mother doesn't simply abandon her child like that... Did no one ever question the story that she had run away with a lover?

Dominique – It's always easy to blame someone who isn't there to defend themselves... People said she had only come here out of self-interest. That she had married Mr de La Mare for his money...

Dominique – For his money...?

Maxime – And yet she apparently left with nothing.

Alex – And I imagine they were never divorced...

Louise – Not as far as I'm aware...

Claude – In any case, no one ever saw her again.

Dominique – The village saw her disappearance as a betrayal too. Right in the middle of a battle that should have united us all.

Claude – Yes... No one hesitated to cast the first stone, did they, Father? Then everyone preferred to forget her.

Alex – It's true that, even in the village, mentioning her name was almost taboo...

Sacha (*lost in thought*) – Marina... Her name was Marina...

The others seem slightly surprised by Sacha's remark.

Fred – So the sinful woman was cast out... while her husband had a statue put up in his honour. He went on to become a senator, I believe...

Louise – You've done your homework, I see...

A pause.

Sacha – So it could be her body that was found beneath the slab of the family vault...?

Claude – At the time, some people did question whether Marina had really left so suddenly, abandoning her daughter... But to most of the villagers, Charles was a hero, and it wasn't wise to contradict him.

A pause.

Fred – So, in fact, if I understand correctly... you all knew?

Claude – We knew nothing for certain. There was no investigation. But it's true that there was a kind of code of silence...

Fred – I see... Questioning the official version would have been like pulling down the statue of Casteljarnac's saviour.

Alex – That's true... It would have been like...

Claude – Questioning the virginity of Joan of Arc.

Fred – And what about you, Louise...?

Louise – It was thirty years ago. My father has since died. And I succeeded him as mayor.

François – The de La Mares are closely bound up with the history of this village.

Claude – Yes, you could even say they're the local lords of the manor.

Maxime – They even split their surname into three separate words to make it sound aristocratic, didn't they, Mrs de La Mare...?

A pause.

Fred – So the patriarch murdered his wife because she was unfaithful to him?

Dominique – Let's not jump to conclusions... There's no proof that she was murdered.

Claude – Then why hide her body and pretend that she had run away?

Sacha – So there must have been accomplices who helped cover up the affair and conceal the body.

Maxime – Accomplices... even within the funeral home, Mrs Bontemps?

Alex – My father was running the firm at the time. I hadn't even been born.

Fred – And your father never told you anything?

Alex (*uneasily*) – I don't know anything specific about it, I assure you. Although, like everyone else, I heard the rumours...

Sacha – And that didn't arouse your suspicions?

Alex – I preferred to treat it as an urban legend. You hear so many stories in our profession, you know... Believe me, there's enough material for a whole book... Why, once, an elderly lady told me that...

Louise – Please, Mrs Bontemps, this really isn't the time...

Alex – I imagine it's much the same for you, Father...

François – In any case, the Church doesn't spread that sort of rumour, you can take my word for it...

Claude – Although... there is that story about the man who dies on a cross and rises again on the third day. As urban legends go, it's hard to beat. It's two thousand years old and people are still talking about it.

Maxime – That story began with an empty tomb. In the de La Mare vault, we've got one occupant too many. It's not quite the same thing...

François – May I remind you that we're talking about Louise's mother... So perhaps you could spare us the tasteless jokes.

Claude – Sorry...

A pause.

Dominique – In any case... all the people involved in this affair are probably dead by now.

Claude – We can't be sure they're all dead... And there must still be a few witnesses. You don't bury a body in secret without someone finding out.

Fred – Besides, why choose to bury the body in the family vault?

Alex – One might imagine that, for Mr de La Mare, it was a way of maintaining some semblance of legality.

Maxime – Legality?

Alex – Or at least respectability... Rather than dumping the body at the bottom of a ravine like some common criminal. Or burning it in a stove like Dr Petiot.

Claude – So, as far as he was concerned, it was simply a strictly private funeral.

Sacha – To preserve the family's reputation...

Claude – And that of the entire village.

Fred – Yes... But you can't keep turning a blind eye. We're talking about murder. A woman murdered by her husband, with the help of accomplices, and then concealed behind a code of silence.

Claude – It is rather ironic... Tomorrow the village will disappear beneath the water... and this macabre discovery is going to force us to rewrite its supposedly heroic past.

Maxime – As everyone knows... when there's a flood, the sewers overflow...

A pause.

Alex – Yes... And when the sewers overflow, the stink affects everyone.

Dominique – Perhaps we could stop with the metaphors... The question is simple. Who stands to gain from opening an investigation so long after the event?

François – No one, I'm afraid.

Maxime – I don't know who would gain, but I can certainly see who might suffer...

Louise – What is strange is that this affair should resurface today of all days.

Dominique – Indeed... And, if I may ask, Mrs Bontemps, your job was simply to transfer the graves listed in the records. What made you decide to excavate beneath the floor slab of the de La Mare family vault?

Alex looks uncomfortable.

Louise – Did you do the same with the other vaults?

Alex – No...

Dominique – Then why this one?

Alex – Let's just say that... I received some very precise information suggesting that human remains might be buried there.

Fred – Information?

Alex – A letter... An anonymous letter...

A pause.

Dominique – So there's a poison-pen letter writer in Casteljarnac...

Louise – And you took the letter seriously...

Maxime – What's the point of asking that? We now have proof that the information was correct, don't we?

Alex – The letter contained very detailed information... It said that if nothing was done, the police would be informed. As you can understand, I have no interest in this affair becoming public either. The reputation of my family is at stake, as well as that of my firm. But I couldn't ignore the letter.

Maxime – A letter written by someone who clearly knows exactly what happened... Any thoughts, Father?

François seems lost in thought.

François – I've always believed that the flooding of this village was God's will.

Fred – A miniature Flood, you mean...?

Maxime – With Casteljarnac-le-Haut as Noah's Ark.

Claude – To punish us all for our sins, wipe the slate clean and start all over again as though nothing had happened?

François – Yes... I believe God has decided to submerge this village in order to cleanse it of its sins...

An awkward silence follows this mystical declaration.

Sacha – Right... So what do we do now? Apart from leaving it in God's hands...

Fred – We have no choice. There must be an investigation to establish the truth.

François – The truth... I get the feeling everyone already knows it, don't they?

Maxime – Perhaps you do... I'd never heard anything about this. Well, I'd heard about the adulterous wife, yes, but not about a murder...

Sacha – Besides, we still don't know for certain whose body it is.

Claude – And we don't know the exact circumstances of the death. Was it manslaughter that someone chose to cover up... or premeditated murder?

Dominique – Madam Mayor...?

Louise – Since the body was lying in our family vault... Yes, the most likely explanation is that my father killed my mother and decided to conceal the body... As for why and how... It happened a very long time ago. Even with an investigation, it would be extremely difficult to establish what really happened.

Claude – What exactly are you suggesting? That we bury the whole affair again, as we did thirty years ago?

Louise – You must understand what a shock this is for me... We are talking about my parents, after all. It's a horrifying story, I know. One I would probably rather never have known about. But what would be gained by dragging it all into the open now...?

Dominique – The guilty party is dead. Those who helped him conceal the crime are probably dead too...

Louise – And even if they aren't, the limitation period will have expired.

Dominique – It's six years for manslaughter. Twenty years for premeditated murder...

Fred – You seem remarkably well informed... You didn't wait until the limitation period had expired before allowing this sordid affair to come to light, did you?

Maxime – It would suit you perfectly if everyone forgot about it, wouldn't it? That way, the family name you went to such lengths to make sound aristocratic wouldn't be tarnished...

Louise – A moment ago, my father was a hero in your eyes. Now you want him condemned posthumously.

Maxime – A moment ago, I didn't know your father was a murderer. You did.

Louise – I assure you I didn't. I was only three months old when it happened. I have nothing to blame myself for. I'm guilty of nothing, and I'm not responsible for what my father did.

Claude – But you had a statue erected in his honour.

Maxime – Hoping that some of his glory would rub off on you and help you succeed him as mayor... Only for you to approve the destruction of the village he fought to save.

Claude – Yes... Today, just as thirty years ago, it is in the de La Mares' interest for this nameless grave to remain buried for ever beneath the waters of the reservoir.

Fred – You may not be responsible for your father's actions, Madam Mayor. But if you refuse to bring this crime to light, you will become complicit in the cover-up.

Maxime – And so will the rest of us...

Silence.

Louise – It's true. I was in denial too. I didn't want to question the official version. You can all understand why. But I wasn't consciously covering anything up, I swear... Do you really think a child can bring herself to consider the possibility that her father murdered her mother?

Dominique – Madam Mayor is right... Don't you think we have enough problems to deal with already? It wouldn't change anything anyway.

Maxime – You said yourself that it would delay the filling of the reservoir, and therefore the destruction of our village. Isn't that right, Mr Nerval?

Sacha – For a few days, perhaps. A few weeks at most. But the project will go ahead. Two workers have already lost their lives during its construction... and the work didn't stop because of that.

Claude – Let's say it would be easier to keep quiet again, as everyone did thirty years ago. But you're forgetting one thing.

Dominique – What?

Fred – That woman's memory.

Silence.

Sacha – You're right.

Claude – In everyone's eyes, including her daughter's, Marina was branded a traitor. A frivolous woman who had supposedly abandoned her husband and child to run away with a lover. When in fact she was a victim of domestic abuse...

Fred – A femicide. Yet another one. Covered up at the time by an all-powerful man, with the complicity of an entire village.

Claude – And now you want to deny her justice for a second time...?

Fred – We can't bring her back to life. But I think she at least has the right to have the truth about what happened to her brought to light.

Maxime – After tarnishing her memory, everyone did their best to erase her completely. While a statue was being erected in honour of her murderer...

Claude – You speak of your family's honour, Madam Mayor... But what about this woman's honour?

Fred – A woman who lies without a proper grave. A grave you are still determined to deny her. For a second time. I will not allow such an outrage.

Dominique – Such an outrage...? That's rather theatrical language, don't you think? You seem to fancy yourself as Antigone...

Fred – Are you threatening to have me killed as she was if I disobey you?

François – Come now, let's be reasonable... No one is going to kill anyone...

Louise – What surprises me is how personally you seem to be taking this, Miss... What was your name again...?

Fred – Pavel.

Louise – Earlier, you told us it was Valberg... Fred Valberg.

Fred – Valberg is my pen name. I thought it sounded better. But my real name is Pavel.

Louise – In any case, we're talking about my mother, not yours. Listening to you, one would think this concerned you personally...

Fred – Precisely. She was your mother. I don't understand how you can so readily contemplate leaving her without a proper grave, merely to protect your own interests. Until now, you regarded her as an unworthy mother. Now you know she didn't abandon you, but was murdered...

François – Come now, my children, this situation is painful enough as it is. We must remain united...

Claude – Oh, spare us, Father... I'm sure you knew and said nothing. Just as the Church has always chosen to turn a blind eye to the many paedophiles in its ranks, allowing them to act with complete impunity simply to protect its reputation.

François – The Church has changed considerably in its handling of such matters...

Fred – Oh yes, of course... A moment ago, you were telling us it was God's will to drown this village beneath millions of gallons of water in order to cleanse it of its sins... Some progress...

Louise – And you seem remarkably partisan for a journalist who, as a matter of principle, ought to remain impartial.

Dominique – Indeed. I thought you were here to observe and report, not to take sides.

Fred – I'm a journalist, but I'm also a citizen. I stand for certain principles. I hope I'm not the only one here tonight who does...

Dominique – And what about you, Claude? I didn't realise you felt so strongly about this affair either...

Claude – I knew Marina. She used to come here often. She confided in me... She was a very endearing young woman, I can vouch for that. Yes, she was a friend...

Dominique – But a friend, er...?

Claude – That's none of your business.

Silence.

Sacha – How could such a thing have been possible? Burying a woman in a family vault... without anyone knowing?

Maxime – I'm not at all sure no one knew. There must have been accomplices. At the funeral home, perhaps...?

Alex – Charles de La Mare was a charismatic figure. He knew how to get what he wanted. And first as mayor, then as a senator, he had ways of putting pressure on people.

François – He also had many loyal friends who admired him for what he had achieved and were therefore prepared to take risks to protect him.

Dominique – By having his wife's body buried in the family vault, in a way... he was restoring her place in the family pantheon.

Fred – More like he believed himself all-powerful... It was a way of retaining control... Of placing himself beyond the justice faced by ordinary people.

Alex – Yes... He probably didn't see himself as a common criminal. If it was an accident... he assumed the right to absolve himself.

Claude – You're still trying to play down what he did... But there's no evidence that it was manslaughter. It may have been premeditated murder...

Sacha – Murder... But why?

Dominique – Jealousy, probably. If his wife had a lover...

Sacha – For the entire village to remain silent, there must have been a very compelling reason.

François – It isn't so difficult to understand... Sending the mayor to prison would have discredited the opposition to the dam project.

Fred – Whatever the reason, it was still a crime.

Maxime – Thirty years ago, the villagers kept quiet to prevent the destruction of the village, and today we're expected to remain silent again to protect the reputation of the woman who is helping to destroy it?

Louise – I bear no legal responsibility for this affair.

Claude – You bear a moral responsibility. This concerns your mother's memory...

Maxime – Yes, but of course, if this sordid story became public, it might jeopardise your re-election...

Louise – Which might allow you to take my place, perhaps?

Maxime – Why not? Unless you intend to keep it for one of your children? The office of mayor isn't hereditary, you know...

Louise – So you want to reveal this affair in order to turn it to your own advantage.

Maxime – Whatever my motives, we must inform the police.

Dominique – About a crime of passion committed thirty years ago?

Fred – A crime of passion... That would suit everyone rather nicely, wouldn't it?

Sacha – Why else would she have been killed?

Fred – Perhaps because she knew things.

Claude – Things? What things?

Fred – That's probably a question an investigation could answer.

Louise – For a mere journalist who covers local crime, you seem to know quite a lot yourself... Who exactly are you, Miss... Pavel?

Dominique – Pavel... Isn't that a Romanian name...?

Louise – May I see your press card?

All eyes turn towards her.

Fred – I haven't got one... I'm not a journalist.

General astonishment.

Dominique – So you lied to us... Then who are you?

A pause.

Fred – Marina was my aunt. My mother's sister.

Dominique – An aunt you can't have known, judging by your age. So what are you doing here?

Fred – I found some letters Marina had written to my mother...

Silence.

Sacha – Letters that prompted you to come here before the village disappeared.

Fred – My mother died a few months ago. She often spoke to me about the sister who had vanished before I was born. She had good reason to doubt the official version of what had happened to her.

Dominique – Then why didn't she come forward sooner?

Fred – We lived in Romania. She couldn't afford to hire a lawyer in France to get an investigation opened.

François – And afterwards...?

Fred – Later, I received a scholarship to study in France. I think that, for me, it was also a way of getting closer to Marina. Shortly before she died, my mother gave me those letters. I understood that she was entrusting me with a mission. When I heard about the dam project, I decided to come here...

Maxime – And what did the letters say?

Fred – Marina told her sister that she felt threatened.

Louise – Threatened? By whom? And why?

Fred – The portrait she painted of her husband is far less flattering than his public image. In defending this village, he was first and foremost defending his own interests.

Maxime – My father told me about it. When the dam project was first proposed, a lot of people began selling their land. Charles de La Mare bought it up at favourable prices. As a senator, he was well informed. He had good reason to believe the project would never go ahead, and that he would later be able to sell the land at a profit.

Dominique – And you think he decided to kill his wife to prevent her from exposing these shady dealings?

Fred – She also describes an authoritarian man... and one capable of violence.

François – Perhaps because his wife was unfaithful to him.

Claude – Do you really mean that, Father? Times have changed, you know. These days, jealousy can hardly be used to justify a crime.

Fred – It's true that, in her letters, she also mentions someone she had confided in... She had apparently become more than friends with this person and was considering leaving with them... and taking her daughter with her.

Dominique – They're only letters... That was her version of events... the view of an unhappy woman who sought comfort in the arms of one of her compatriots. For all we know, she really did run away with him.

Alex – In that case, whose body was found beneath the floor slab of the de La Mare family vault...?

Claude – One thing is certain: Marina's lover wasn't Romanian, I can assure you.

Dominique – Oh, really? And how do you know that?

Claude – I just do.

Dominique – Because you were her lover, perhaps...?

Claude – Unfortunately not...

Alex – Then who was?

Claude – It's up to him to come forward... if he wants to.

A pause.

Fred – And you said nothing either? I thought she was your friend...

Claude – I was very young at the time. Charles was a public figure. Everyone said she had left. I wanted to believe it. Now, I think we need to know what really happened...

Louise – So you were the anonymous letter writer...

Claude – And I don't regret it. The truth had to come out before all the evidence was destroyed for ever...

A pause.

Sacha – So she may have been killed because she intended to expose her husband's shady dealings?

Fred – And those who stood to gain from her disappearance said nothing. After all, she wasn't from the village....

Maxime – Are we really going to condemn her a second time?

Fred – And put the statue of her murderer back up outside the new town hall?

A pause.

Louise – All right. I agree that the statue should remain here and disappear beneath the water.

Maxime – That suits you rather well, actually...

Louise – Whatever I say or do, I'll always be guilty in your eyes.

Dominique – I suggest we take a vote.

Maxime – It would have no legal standing!

Dominique – It would only be symbolic, of course... Who is in favour of making the discovery of this body public?

Fred, Maxime and Claude raise their hands.

Dominique – So the majority of us believe it would be better if this body never resurfaced...

Sacha – For the record, I abstained.

Fred – In any case, I don't consider myself bound by the result of this vote.

Dominique – That's your choice, but I'm warning you...

Fred – Is that a threat?

Dominique – I only meant that the findings of any investigation might very well please no one.

A pause.

Louise – What if her lover killed her?

Claude – Why?

Dominique – Jealousy again.

Sacha – That doesn't make sense. How could her lover, without any help, have hidden the body beneath the family vault of the wronged husband? Forgive me, Madam Mayor...

A pause.

Fred – Alex? Are you sure you know nothing about the funeral home's involvement in this clandestine burial?

Claude – It probably took place at night. In secret. Like actors used to be buried in the old days, when the Church refused them a Christian burial...

A pause.

Alex – I only know what my father told me towards the end of his life, to clear his conscience...

Maxime – So you knew as well.

Alex – My father never told me who it was. But yes, I suspected.

Fred – And what exactly did he tell you?

Alex – He admitted that he had helped conceal a body.

Sacha – Why? He could have refused...

Alex – Because the priest had expressly asked him to do it...

A pause.

Fred – You, Father?

The priest remains silent, visibly uncomfortable.

François – I was a young priest at the time. I had only just been ordained, and Casteljarnac was my first parish.

Maxime – So you know what happened? You were involved? You agreed to help cover up the crime in order to protect the mayor.

A pause.

François – Charles wasn't responsible for Marina's death.

Sacha – He wasn't? Then who was?

François – I was.

Silence.

Louise – You, Father? You killed my mother?

François – Charles had asked for my help. His wife had just told him that she was leaving him and taking their child with her.

Sacha – And then?

François – I went to the de La Mare house to try to make her see reason. I failed. There was a violent argument. Her husband tried to restrain her. He even talked about locking her in her room. At one point, she tried to escape. I clumsily tried to stop her...

Fred – And then?

François – She fell down the stairs. Her head struck the corner of a pillar. It was an accident...

Claude – If you say so...

François – It's the truth, I assure you.

Sacha – In any case, there are no witnesses left to contradict you.

François – I've just confessed to causing someone's death. Why would I lie?

Claude – To play down your crime by passing it off as an accident...

Maxime – Or to protect Mr de La Mare.

François – That is how it happened. I swear before God.

Sacha – You'll have to swear it before a judge...

Fred – And afterwards?

François – Charles immediately suggested covering up his wife's death. To protect me, to protect the reputation of the Church... and his own.

Fred – In fact, her disappearance suited him...

Sacha – And you buried the victim's body beneath the floor slab of the family vault...

François – Yes... With the help of the funeral director at the time.

Claude (*to Alex*) – With your father's help, then...

Alex – No one dared refuse Charles de La Mare anything... or the priest. My father was deeply religious. To him, whatever the priest said was gospel truth.

Fred (*to François*) – And you kept silent all these years...

François – I was young. I was afraid. Afraid of the consequences. I confided in my bishop, and he advised me to keep quiet too.

Claude – Why doesn't that surprise me...?

François – When I began to question whether I had done the right thing, several years had already passed. Digging up the past... I thought it would do more harm than good.

Louise – So my mother didn't have a lover? Even that was a lie?

A pause.

Sacha – No, that wasn't a lie.

Louise – How do you know?

Sacha – Because I was her lover.

Dominique – You?

Sacha – When I worked on the first dam project, I was only a young engineer. I met Marina. She was unhappy in her marriage. And in this village, she felt terribly alone. To everyone here, she was an outsider. I was madly in love with her. I kept urging her to leave her husband and come away with me...

Fred – But naturally, Charles didn't agree...

Sacha – The mayor's wife leaving her husband for the engineer whose job was to destroy the village... Obviously not.

Claude – If she hadn't died, they would probably have shaved her head, like the women who slept with the enemy after the Liberation...

Maxime – In any case, it would have seriously tarnished the image of that great man.

François – Charles couldn't bear the idea. That was how everything spiralled out of control...

Maxime (*to Sacha*) – So you knew something too?

Sacha – Then, from one day to the next, Marina disappeared from my life. At first, I thought she had changed her mind. That she had decided to stay with Charles. To protect her child. Then the rumour began to spread that she had run away. I thought she had gone back to Romania, to make sure her husband couldn't find her.

Fred – So you believed the official version too...

Sacha – I had doubts, but what could I do? I was the lover, not the husband... Eventually, I resigned myself to it. But I never forgot her. That is probably why I never married... And when, thirty years later, the opportunity arose, I did everything I could to become the new project manager.

Dominique – To take revenge? By destroying the village...

Sacha – At first, that was part of it, I admit. But more than anything, unconsciously, I wanted to use the opportunity to find out the truth. Now I know...

A pause.

Fred – I'm not sure you know everything...

Sacha – What now...?

Fred – In the letters my mother gave me, Marina said that her husband was not the father of her child. That was another reason she wanted to leave him.

Maxime – And that's why he reacted so violently. He was losing both his wife and his daughter.

Claude – And what a humiliation that must have been for him...

Alex – So he didn't agree to conceal the body merely to protect you, Father, but also to take revenge, knowing he would never be punished..

Maxime – But then... who was the father?

Everyone turns to Sacha, who seems frozen.

Louise – Did you know?

Sacha – Absolutely not... I swear she never told me... If I had known, perhaps I would have acted differently...

Maxime *(to Louise)* – How ironic. You thought your father was the man who saved the village. It turns out you're the daughter of the man who is going to destroy it...

Sacha – So you could be my daughter, Louise...?

Louise *(embarrassed)* – For the moment, there's no proof, is there...? So I suggest we discuss this again later...

Maxime – A DNA test will settle it... It's very easy nowadays, you know...

Alex – There is a certain family resemblance, isn't there?

Claude – You have to admit, it's quite something... In a single evening, you discover that your mother really is dead, but that your father may still be alive....

Fred – When I mentioned *Night of the Living Dead*, I didn't realise how right I was...

Dominique – Please, show a little decency.

Claude – All right, I won't say another word...

Silence.

Dominique – So what do we do now?

Fred – Father?

François – I will help you establish the truth and restore Marina's good name, even if I have to accept the legal consequences of my confession.

Claude – Especially since you can no longer be prosecuted, isn't that right, Father? Still, better late than never...

Maxime – In that case, Louise, you'll no longer be able to conceal the de La Mare family's sordid secrets.

Dominique – Even if it means tarnishing the image of this village...?

Maxime – This village is about to disappear beneath the water. Thanks to you...

Fred – Dominique?

Dominique – This has gone too far. Too many people know now. Everyone here, for a start. Someone is bound to talk. We won't be able to hide the truth any longer...

Louise – I agree that there's no turning back now. But it will come as a terrible shock. To everyone. Starting with me, of course...

Maxime – You'll pretend to be surprised. You'll make the courageous decision to pull the patriarch's statue down from its pedestal... And with a bit of luck, you'll be able to remain in power and carry on enriching yourself...

Fred – Sacha?

Sacha – It won't prevent the project from going ahead.

François – We must accept that it was God's will...

Claude – Do you really believe the new village will be a haven of peace and brotherhood, Father...?

Sacha – For that to happen, your Noah's Ark would have needed to take only the animals aboard...

François – So you don't believe in God?

Sacha – I believe the world is absurd. An absurd world in which humanity tries to invent a purpose for itself. God is one of the ideas human beings have created to give meaning to life.

A pause.

Fred – In one way or another, everyone contributed to Marina's death and to concealing the truth. Some by taking a direct part in the crime, some by helping to cover it up, others simply by remaining silent.

Claude – You're right... We're all guilty. Even those of us who, like me, lacked the courage to speak out against this injustice sooner.

Sacha – It's true. I was a coward too...

A pause.

Fred – At least my aunt's memory will be restored. In the end, she was the true heroine of this village...

Maxime – Let's not go too far. She was a victim, yes. That doesn't make her a saint...

Dominique – In any case, she wasn't exactly Joan of Arc either.

Sacha – What are you implying?

Dominique – All she wrote was that Charles wasn't the father of her child. She didn't say that you were...

Claude – Who else could it have been?

Dominique – She may have had several partners... Perhaps the Romanian lover wasn't a myth after all.

Claude – And even if that were true? Did she deserve to die because she was a free woman?

Louise – No, of course not...

A pause.

Alex – Right, then. If we're all agreed, I'll call the gendarmerie and report the discovery of human remains that do not appear in the burial register...

Alex takes out her mobile phone, steps aside and is about to make the call.

Claude – Wait...

Alex – Sorry...?

Claude – On second thoughts, I'm beginning to wonder whether Dominique may be right.

Dominique – Really?

Claude – After thirty years, establishing exactly what happened will be extremely difficult.

Fred – And whatever happens, people will believe whatever they choose to believe...

Louise – They'll have a field day, that's for certain.

Sacha – It will only set the rumours flying again...

Dominique – Sometimes, once you've hit rock bottom, it's better not to keep digging, as Alex said...

Alex – So what do I do?

Claude – What if we simply let her rest in peace beneath the waters of the reservoir...?

Sacha – We still have to consider her family. They have a right to know what became of Marina... Let me remind you that, officially, she has never been declared dead.

Fred – Her family... Apart from me... and her daughter, of course, there is no one left.

A pause.

Sacha – Becoming the Lady of the Lake... I think she might rather have liked the idea. She wasn't born to be a victim, you know... She was a strong-minded woman. She had plans. She wanted to write a novel...

Alex – Her life became a novel...

Dominique – Louise? After all, she was your mother.

A pause.

Louise – What would be the point of reopening old wounds...? Everyone who knew her is here. And now we know what happened.

A pause.

Dominique – Maxime? Now is the time to speak... or remain silent for ever.

Maxime – All right... But only if Madam Mayor resigns...

Dominique – You can't be serious! That's blackmail!

Maxime – Why? Have you also bought farmland in the new village? Were you counting on the current council to have it rezoned for development...?

Dominique – How dare you!

Louise – I will resign as mayor once the village has been relocated.

Dominique – You're not really going to do that?

Louise – I've lived a lie all my life. You all knew it. And perhaps, deep down, so did I... It's time to put an end to all this.

A pause.

Claude – Fred...?

Fred – A moment ago, we thought the person responsible for Marina's death was no longer alive. We now know that he is here, among us...

All eyes turn towards the priest.

Dominique – Father...?

François – I shall leave my parish... I shall retire to a monastery to atone for my sins. I beg you all to forgive me. Believe me, I have lived with this burden for thirty years, and I shall continue to carry this cross until the end of my days. But it is already a relief to know that those most directly affected now know the truth.

A pause.

Alex – With your permission, I'll place a plaque bearing her name on the slab covering the vault. We owe her that much...

Louise – Yes, please...

Alex – I'll do it myself first thing tomorrow morning. Naturally, our firm will bear the cost.

Claude – A goodwill gesture... It's the least one might expect from Bontemps Funeral Director, isn't it...?

Fred – In other words, it's simply a matter of finishing the job...

Alex – Anyone who wishes may spend a few moments at her grave before it disappears for ever beneath the waters of the reservoir.

Sacha – I'll make sure they delay filling the reservoir by at least one day.

A pause.

Louise – Even though we are all agreed, I suggest that we vote again, to lend this decision a certain solemnity, even if it has no official standing...

Dominique – Who is in favour of leaving this grave where it is, on the understanding, of course, that we all undertake never to reveal to anyone what we know about this tragic affair...?

They all raise their hands.

Louise – The motion is carried. Unanimously.

Silence.

Alex – So this time, it really is the end.

Claude – Yes... It's hard to imagine that, once we've gone, no one will ever walk the streets of Casteljarnac again.

Fred – The water will cover everything, even the memories.

Sacha – But this submerged village will remain inhabited by the ghosts of the past. All those who have lived here for more than a thousand years.

Fred – In a few thousand years, archaeologists will discover this site, just as Lascaux or Pompeii were discovered, and they will wonder what happened here.

Alex – Why the cemetery is empty.

Louise – Except for a single grave.

Fred – Sooner or later, our world will disappear too. And with it, all of human history.

Dominique – Perpetrators and victims alike. We shall all disappear.

Sacha – The memory of our heroic deeds, and of our crimes. In the end, everything will be erased.

Claude – Lies and truths alike. And nothing will remain.

Louise – No trace of our existence.

François – Unless Providence sends us another Noah's Ark.

Fred – But is that really something we should wish for...?

They leave. The stage remains empty for a moment.

Blackout.

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 websites :

<https://jeanpierremartinez.net/>

<https://comediatheque.net/>

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the French Society of Authors (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the [contact form on his websites](#).

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

<https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/>

Other plays by the same author translated in English

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
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
Pentimento
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
Horizons
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
Requiem for a Stradivarius
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

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Don't panic !
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

*All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded
free of charge from his websites:*

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