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The Most Beautiful Village in France
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The Most Beautiful Village in France

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Any resemblance to an existing French village is purely coincidental.

Bellecon-le-Château, a little village in Provence, is about to be named France's Most Beautiful Village. Meanwhile, the second round of the local elections could hand the town hall to a candidate of the Populist Front. At La Part des Anges, the village bistro, the locals argue over whether the incumbent mayor or his formidable rival will win. A string of unexpected events soon threatens both elections, and seems to confirm Winston Churchill's observation that democracy is the worst system, apart from all the others.

Characters:
Jacques Robinet, known as JR: the incumbent mayor
Baroness de Carlsberg-Kronenbourg: his opponent
Marcel(le): deputy mayor and notary
René(e): a penniless painter
Maurice(tte): a fond-of-a-drink village doctor
Charles: a wealthy newcomer from Paris
Dominique: a retired army colonel
Ramirez: a municipal police officer
Sanchez: Ramirez's deputy
Claude: owner of the bistro
Francine : an upper-middle-class Provençal woman
Bernadette: her daughter, an aspiring actress
Mario: a handyman and mechanic

The mayor and the baroness may be played by the same performer.
Marcel(le), René(e), Maurice(tte), Dominique, Ramirez, Sanchez and Claude may be played by women or men.
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 Provençal bistro. Above it hangs a sign: La Part des Anges (The Angels' Share). Maurice, a slightly tipsy local doctor, René, a penniless artist, and Dominique, with the bearing of a retired soldier, sit at a few small tables. Cicadas chirp in the heat.

Maurice – It's quiet today.

René – Even the cicadas are keeping their voices down.

Dominique – The calm before the storm...

Maurice – Feels like a storm, doesn't it?

René – No, it feels like an oven.

Dominique – If only the mistral would blow.

René – The mistral is Provence's free air conditioning.

Maurice – What are you working on at the moment?

René – Let me check my thermometer. *(He takes a medical thermometer from his pocket.)* Thirty-eight point five! I'm officially too ill to work.

Maurice – If you have a fever, you ought to see a doctor. In case you've forgotten, I am one.

René – That's the temperature outside. Cicadas start singing above twenty-five degrees. I start painting below twenty-two.

Dominique – Even the cicada in the old fable worked harder than you. At least she sang all summer.

René – I'm a cicada with a heat intolerance.

Maurice – So why did you settle in the south?

René – To take it easy. Like Van Gogh.

Dominique – Van Gogh managed to paint a few masterpieces while he was down here.

René – He obviously had better weather.

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 proprietor, appears with the forbidding air of a brothel madam and reluctantly refills their glasses.

Claude – Rosé and grapefruit, as usual?

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 – With all the wine you drink, you must be indestructible.

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 – Of course. Even the cicadas are on France's thirty-five-hour working week. They've taken the rest of the day off.

Claude goes inside. Charles enters, dressed like a well-heeled Parisian on holiday.

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 advertise it. And then people wonder why the French pension system's going broke.

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 – We should send pensioners to the front in the next war. It would solve the retirement crisis overnight.

René – Imagine the First World War fought by old men with walking frames, belting one another with their sticks. There's a painting in that somewhere.

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

Dominique – What commission is this?

Charles – A copy of Delacroix's Liberty Leading the People. For above my fireplace.

Maurice – You've certainly set him a challenge.

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

Charles – I want a copy Delacroix himself would be happy to sign.

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

Dominique – Proof that you can be filthy rich and still love the French Revolution.

Maurice – Isn't the original in the Louvre? What are you copying it from?

René pulls an old banknote from his pocket and shows them the portrait of Delacroix.

René – An old hundred-franc note.

Maurice – Ah, so that's why Charles loves Delacroix. He misses the old money.

Dominique – In the days of the old francs, there wasn't even a wealth tax.

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 paying customer, not your patron. I've already given you an advance.

René raises his glass.

René – And I've invested every penny wisely.

He downs his glass in one go.

Charles – A Provençal artist who only paints in cold weather, a doctor who holds consultations in a bar, and a colonel waiting for the next world war. France is in safe hands. At least I've had air conditioning installed at home.

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

Maurice – The heatwave in 2003 was dreadful. All anyone wanted me for was death certificates.

René – And things haven't changed much, have they?

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 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 – This parasite lives on our pension contributions, and I bet he still won't buy us a drink.

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 can't change a five-hundred-euro note.

Claude – I do.

Charles – Oh, well. Drinks for all these old fossils. Perhaps it'll bring them back to life.

Claude – Or finish the job. Rosé and grapefruit for everyone, then.

Claude takes the note and goes inside. Charles joins the others. Dominique opens the local paper.

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 – I went for my usual morning dive. There was no water in the pool.

Dominique – Lucky you noticed before you jumped.

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

Dominique waves the newspaper.

Dominique – Listen to this! Bellecon-le-Château could be named the Most Beautiful Village in France!

Maurice – It's not a done deal yet.

Dominique – We're in the final, anyway. *(Checking the paper.)* Two inspectors arrive today. Their report will decide what the jury announces.

Charles – It's paradise here. Every morning I open my window, breathe in, and thank heaven I'm not inhaling the fumes from the Paris ring road any more.

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 – Like a fish that's been rotting in the sun for a week.

Claude – Are you saying that about me?

René – Maurice's acid reflux. You see, you really should give up that grapefruit juice.

Dominique – More likely the drains. One shower of rain and Bellecon's sewers 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 Bellecon has to meet her.

René – She's even listed in a French travel guide under 'Worth a Detour'.

Charles – And a name like Madame Claude! She sounds as though she ought to run a brothel.

The others exchange knowing smiles.

Maurice – Ah, innocent little 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 say she's semi-retired, like the colonel.

Maurice – But she'll still come out of retirement if the right customer asks.

They laugh. Claude returns to clear a table and they immediately straighten their faces. She gives them a suspicious look and leaves. They clink glasses and drain them.

Charles – So, is the election a foregone conclusion?

Maurice – Bellecon-le-Château certainly deserves to win the beauty contest.

Charles – I meant the election for mayor.

Maurice – Ah, well...

René – Are we really going to let France's most beautiful village elect a mayor from the Populist Front?

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

Charles – Populist Front, you said?

René – The Extreme Left and the Extreme Right have joined forces on one list.

Dominique – They already had the same slogans, the same voters and practically the same policies.

Maurice – And almost the same name.

René *(grandly)* – We must rally the respectable citizens of Bellecon to save it from these two extremes meeting in the middle!

Dominique – On the other hand, voting for JR...

Charles – JR?

Dominique – Jacques Robinet, our current mayor. He calls himself JR, like that oil tycoon in the old television soap Dallas.

Charles – Robinet? Isn't that French for a tap?

René – A name he was born to live up to.

Dominique – He's stayed in office by keeping public money flowing into the right pockets.

Maurice – Mind you, JR is quite the educated man. He went to Centrale...

Charles – Centrale? The famous French engineering school?

Dominique – Central Prison.

Charles – That sounds more like him.

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 – Never pick a side too soon. That's how my grandfather ended up with his head shaved when France was liberated.

René – Your grandfather had an affair with a German soldier?

Maurice – The Occupation was a rather confusing chapter of French history.

René – And not one of the most glorious.

Bernadette arrives, young and provocatively dressed, and starts wiping down the tables.

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

All the men's eyes turn to her.

Maurice – Bernadette! What are you doing in this den of vice?

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

Bernadette – Actually, my agent's got me a part in a television soap. I'm playing a waitress in a bar down at Marseille's Old Port.

René – So your agent sent you to Madame Claude for research? That's thorough.

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

Dominique – Ah, I see...

Bernadette – Method acting. You live the role. You become the character.

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

Bernadette – Playing a what?

Bernadette starts clearing glasses, leaning over the table suggestively.

René – A nun, for example. Imagine if they'd sent you to a convent for research. Your mother would never have allowed it.

Maurice – Nor the Mother Superior, for that matter.

Mario enters: handsome, dark-haired, and wearing overalls stained with engine oil.

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

Bernadette, seeing Mario, spills her tray.

René – The waitress part needs a little more rehearsal, I think.

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 Bernadette)* I'll have a coffee, please.

Bernadette – Right away...

Bernadette goes into the bistro.

Charles – He's supposed to be an excellent mechanic. My notary recommended him.

Maurice – Your notary?

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. Bernadette returns with Mario's coffee.

Mario – Thank you.

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

René – Bernadette, another round. Put it on the angels' tab, will you?

Claude – The angels don't run tabs.

Maurice – That's what I thought...

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

Bernadette 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 the wine trade, the angels' share is what disappears from the barrel as the wine ages. Nobody knows where it goes, so the angels get the blame.

René – That happens in politics, too.

Charles – Politics?

Maurice – Public money has a remarkable habit of evaporating after an election. Our mayor's an expert.

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

René – The angels' share. Somebody certainly gets a share of it.

Maurice – Let's drink our share while we've still got it.

René – Before the angels help themselves.

The Baroness de Carlsberg-Kronenbourg arrives. She is imposing, extravagantly dressed and heavily made up. The baroness may be played by a man, possibly the performer who also plays the mayor.

Dominique – Well, here comes the baroness herself.

Charles – The famous Baroness de Carlsberg-Kronenbourg! Is she a real aristocrat, or did she get the title by drinking an entire brewery?

Dominique – She comes from one of Belgium's finest families. Related to the king, they say.

Maurice – Which king?

René – The king of beer, perhaps.

Baroness – Mario, darling, thank you for fixing my little Renault Twingo. Since you changed the engine, it drives like a Jaguar.

Maurice – Perhaps it is a Jaguar engine. You never know what parts Mario gets hold of.

Baroness – Call round at the château and I'll pay you. Cash, as agreed.

Mario – Very well, Madame la Baronne.

Baroness – 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?

Baroness – 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 Kronenbourg.' Now there's a slogan that should win the drinkers' vote. What can I get you, Baroness?

Baroness – A draught beer.

Claude – Carlsberg? Heineken? *(The baroness shoots her a murderous look.)* I'm only asking.

Claude leaves.

Baroness – 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 – Someone propositioned you? Lucky you. It never happens to me.

Baroness – And what about cleanliness? Smell the stink this corrupt mayor has left us! The sewers overflow, rats roam the streets, and the council does nothing!

Maurice – Not to mention the parking problems...

Baroness – People park anywhere! I've even seen disabled drivers taking up ordinary parking spaces. What does the council do? Nothing!

Dominique – Tackling anti-social behaviour is a must.

Baroness – If I'm elected, I'll have laser cameras installed on every street corner.

Dominique – Lasers? For night vision?

Baroness – No, to vaporise offenders on the spot! Zero tolerance!

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

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

René – But you're Belgian yourself, aren't you?

Claude returns with the baroness' beer.

Baroness – A Belgian baroness feels at home wherever there's beer, chips and a château. I meant all these foreigners arriving from outside Europe. *(To Mario.)* Not you, Mario. You may work illegally, but at least you work. 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 – Follow her trail. Like Hansel and Gretel, except that this dog leaves something a bit less appetising than breadcrumbs.

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

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

Charles – Her dog's name is Antoinette?

René – Antoinette's just her pet name. Her full name is Marie-Antoinette. Of course.

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 – Only a Belgian would come to France as a tax refugee.

Charles – Do many Belgians live around here?

Dominique – Some parts of Provence are famous for truffles. Ours is famous for Belgians.

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

Dominique – I tried to buy it myself. The town hall used a special legal power to stop me. The very next day, it sold the château to the baroness.

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

Dominique – A left-wing royalist, apparently.

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 – Bellecon has a very large middle class: half the villagers pay a tax on vast fortunes, and the other half live on benefits.

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! A fight after a rock concert in Bellecon. We ought to ban rock concerts completely.

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

Bernadette returns just as Mario is leaving. Their eyes meet. To wildly romantic music, they approach one another in exaggerated slow motion and kiss passionately. The others stare in amazement.

Dominique – Is she rehearsing her soap-opera part again?

René – Looks more like Beauty and the Beast.

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

Baroness – My dog's been kidnapped!

Maurice – Maybe the pound took her.

Baroness – There was an envelope in my letterbox... with one of Antoinette's ears inside!

Claude – An ear? Good heavens! Like Van Gogh!

Dominique – Unlike Van Gogh, the dog was kidnapped. Van Gogh cut off his own ear.

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

René – You might expect that from a painter. But a dog?

Baroness – 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!

Baroness – 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?

Baroness – They're trying to silence me! But nothing will stop me fighting for local democracy. *(Grandly.)* I offer myself to Bellecon-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 Bernadette 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. A match made in heaven: the faded elegance of provincial old money and the vulgar splendour of new money from Paris.

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 *(a little louder)* – And what can I get you?

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

Charles – Yes, I've only just arrived. By the way, what do you call the people of Bellecon-le-Château?

Claude – Bellecons. Con artists, mostly. Now, 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 say I buy art as an investment.

Claude *(shouting)* – WHAT CAN I GET YOU?

They all stare at her.

Francine – Tea... I'll have tea. What kind have you got?

Claude – Lipton.

Francine – Fine. Tea, then. With a slice of lemon, please.

Claude goes inside. Francine's mobile rings and she answers.

Francine – Hello, Francine de la Chatelière speaking. I called earlier about... *(To the others.)* Excuse me a moment.

Francine steps inside to take the call in private.

Maurice – I've some terrible news. Strictly between us, of course. Doctor–patient confidentiality.

Dominique – You can trust us. We won't breathe a word.

Maurice – Francine's husband has had a stroke.

René – Bertrand? Since when?

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 struggled to maintain her. The house, I mean. Though his wife wasn't cheap either.

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

Dominique – Depends. *(To Maurice.)* Was the stroke serious?

Maurice – Well, I might be interested too. At the right price...

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 – A few family difficulties...

Dominique – Yes, we've heard.

Francine – You have? *(Maurice gives Dominique a warning look.)* Doctor, do you think it's serious?

Maurice – Well, I haven't seen the hospital notes. It depends how quickly he was treated...

Francine – Oh, I didn't mean Bertrand. The hospital says he'll survive, with a little facial paralysis.

Dominique – That's a relief.

Francine – My daughter. She keeps seeing the Virgin Mary.

René – The Virgin?

Francine – The Virgin Mary. Like the visions at Lourdes.

Claude brings Francine's tea to the table.

Claude – Saint Bernadette saw her at Lourdes. I suppose your Bernadette thought it was part of the job.

Francine – Do you think I should see a doctor?

Maurice – Well, perhaps...

Francine – And what about her competition? I don't know what to do.

Maurice – Which competition?

Francine – She's entering Miss Provence. Do you think she should mention the visions on the entry form?

René – That could actually be a plus.

Maurice – If Bellecon loses the beauty contest, we can always turn the village into a place of pilgrimage.

Ramirez and Sanchez enter, dressed like the Blues Brothers in dark suits and sunglasses.

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 – France’s Most Beautiful Village contest!

Maurice – They're probably here undercover...

Ramirez and Sanchez sit at a table.

Dominique – Gentlemen, welcome to our charming village. I'm sure the owner will be delighted to offer you a welcome drink.

Claude gives Dominique a murderous glare. The two strangers exchange wary looks, then accept.

Ramirez – Well... it would be rude to refuse.

René – It's our custom. Bellecon is famous for its hospitality.

Claude – Right, rosé and grapefruit, as everyone else is having?

Sanchez – Never while we're on duty.

Ramirez – Well, we mustn't offend our hosts. A small rosé for me and a grapefruit juice for my deputy.

Sanchez looks distinctly unhappy.

Maurice – Besides the natural charm of its people, our village has a wealth of treasures to discover.

René – Even Belgians come to live here, for the climate and the remarkably gentle local taxes.

Maurice – Bellecon welcomes other cultures, provided they don't differ too much from our own.

Claude serves the drinks.

Ramirez – Thank you.

Sanchez – Such a warm welcome makes a change. In our line of work, we don't make many friends.

Charles – What will you see first? Our château?

Ramirez – Well, we're only just beginning our investigation.

Marcelle enters, an energetic local official with a mobile pressed to her ear.

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

Maurice – Looking for a holiday home? That's Marcelle, our deputy mayor and notary. Every property deal in Bellecon goes through her hands.

Dominique – And she signs the building permits, too.

René – A one-stop shop for everything. That's Bellecon's great administrative innovation.

Charles – She can also recommend an honest plumber or a mechanic who never asks for a receipt.

Marcelle puts away her phone.

Marcelle – Well? Have you met the two new members of our municipal police? The mayor set up the force himself, to ensure peace and tranquillity for all our citizens.

René – A municipal police force?

Ramirez – Chief Officer Ramirez. And my deputy, Sanchez.

Marcelle – They used to be with the national police, until a rather unfortunate incident led to their resignations.

Sanchez – We're investigating the baroness's missing dog.

Ramirez – Though we can't rule out the possibility that she staged the whole thing to discredit the mayor.

Sanchez's phone rings. He answers.

Sanchez – Yes... What? Really? I'll tell them. *(He puts the phone away.)* The baroness has just received the dog's other ear. And its tail.

Marcelle – Good heavens! How dreadful!

Ramirez – Two ears and a tail. This is getting serious.

Dominique – Poor Antoinette. Next they'll send her head.

Marcelle – Gentlemen, don't let us detain you. That poor animal is one of our citizens too. It deserves all the protection our new municipal police can provide.

Ramirez – You can count on us, Deputy Mayor.

Marcelle – And here comes the mayor himself.

Jacques Robinet enters dressed as a television cowboy, in loafers, a Stetson and sunglasses. He may be played by the same performer who played the baroness.

Mayor – Good morning, everyone. *(To Ramirez and Sanchez.)* We haven't met. Jacques Robinet, mayor of this peaceful little town. My friends call me JR.

Ramirez – An honour, Mr Mayor. Sanchez, aren't you going to finish your grapefruit juice?

Sanchez – Yes, Chief. Right away.

Ramirez and Sanchez leave.

Mayor *(to Claude)* – Another round for everyone, on my personal account.

Claude – You mean on the council's account?

Mayor – A mayor is on duty twenty-four hours a day, Madame Claude. I have no private life. How could I have a private bill separate from the town hall's? Friends, I can count on your votes, can't I?

Charles – That depends. What's in your manifesto?

Mayor – You're new here, aren't you? A proper mayor doesn't need a manifesto! Any more than a good general needs a map. Isn't that right, Colonel? A true leader knows where he's going.

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 Bellecon-le-Château to the finals? That's right, I did.

René – But the result hasn't been decided yet.

Mayor – Vote for Jacques Robinet and that prize is as good as ours! The judges are meeting at a grand hotel on the Riviera where I'm a regular. Aren't they, Madame Claude? A jury's like a flower bed: water it generously and it rewards you. Duty calls!

He leaves.

Maurice – He seems to be in a hurry.

Marcelle – I must get back to the town hall. I have my first same-sex wedding to officiate.

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

Charles – That won't win him my vote. I insist on a mayor who respects minority rights.

Marcelle – He does, he does! I assure you, our mayor fully supports marriage equality.

Charles – So why isn't he doing it?

Marcelle – A small engagement came up.

Charles – That's what they always say.

Marcelle – Well, let's call it a very serious commitment. *(Lowering her voice.)* He has to report to the police as part of his bail conditions. Now, I really must go. Love waits for no one!

Marcelle leaves.

Charles – Do you think JR can still win?

Maurice – If he isn't back behind bars by polling day.

Charles – What's he actually charged with?

Dominique – They call it ‘passive corruption’ these days. We used to call it taking bribes.

René – JR doesn't even wait for the angels to take their share. He drinks straight from the barrel.

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

Dominique – People drive like maniacs! The roads in this part of Provence are notorious.

Maurice – Another crash on Plane Tree Avenue, no doubt. And there's a solid white line down the middle.

René – The only white lines the local youths obey are lines of cocaine.

Maurice's mobile rings.

Maurice – Hello? What? No! All right, I'm coming.

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

Maurice – It's about the baroness.

René – The baroness?

Maurice – She's been in a car crash.

Dominique – Serious?

Maurice – According to our new sheriff, her little Renault is now a work of modern art. A handbag is the only thing sticking out of the wreckage.

Francine – Good Lord! With all these lunatics on the roads! I worry so much about my daughter. I hope the Virgin Mary is watching over her.

Maurice – I'd better go. They need me to sign the death certificate.

Dominique – Already? That was quick.

Maurice leaves.

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

Claude heads back into the bistro.

René – Charles, I know what you're going to say, but could you give me another little advance? For a wreath for the late baroness, of course.

Charles – In your dreams.

René – If I can't beg another advance out of you, I suppose I'd better do some work.

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 come with you? I'd like to see how your husband is getting on. I did mention I was looking for a house in Bellecon? One with a garden, preferably.

Charles – I'm off too. I must see to my leak... And I still haven't voted.

René and Charles leave in one direction; Dominique and Francine in the other.

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 – Could someone have arranged a crash for the Baroness de Corona-Budweiser? Like Princess Diana?

Marcelle – A death this convenient is bound to look suspicious. You'd better get to the bottom of it quickly, Ramirez, if you want to stay our sheriff.

Ramirez – The doctor is examining the remains found wedged in the Jaguar engine.

Marcelle – Jaguar? The baroness drove a little Renault Twingo!

Ramirez – That engine was definitely a Jaguar V6. At full speed it can make a terrible mess of a human body.

Marcelle – But surely someone must have identified her? Didn't she have children?

Ramirez – You might as well ask a calf to identify its mother in a packet of minced beef.

Francine returns. Marcelle stops her.

Marcelle – If Bernadette's visions could turn Bellecon into another Lourdes, think what it would do for the shops! Small businesses are our most loyal voters.

Francine – Do you think so? I wouldn't want to upset the child. Still, if it helps the local economy...

Marcelle – But we'd need the Vatican to take the apparitions seriously. Forgive me, Francine, but are you quite sure Bernadette isn't taking drugs?

Francine – I sometimes share a joint with her, just so she won't think I'm hopelessly old-fashioned. Nothing hallucinogenic, I promise.

Marcelle – And she's not inclined to invent things, is she?

Francine – Are you calling my daughter a liar? She may not be baptised, but she goes to a Catholic school!

Marcelle – Young people are so impressionable. They think they've seen the Virgin Mary, and it turns out to be a pop star. Where did she actually see her?

Francine – On her iPhone.

Marcelle – Her iPhone?

Francine – She was scrolling through TikTok when the Virgin Mary suddenly appeared on her screen.

Marcelle – The Virgin Mary on TikTok? Somehow I doubt the Vatican follows her account. Are you sure it wasn't a filter?

Ramirez – We'll need a description for a police sketch. Then we'll show it to the village priest. He should know a virgin when he sees one online.

Marcelle – We'd better wait before asking the priest. He was very close to the baroness, if you know what I mean. He must be devastated.

Ramirez – Don't worry. We'll be discreet.

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

Francine – Not at school, she doesn't. Is that essential?

Marcelle – A saint who can't perform miracles is like a property developer who doesn't bribe anyone. What's the point?

Sanchez enters with Maurice, wearing a white coat liberally stained with blood.

Ramirez – Ah, here's the pathologist to give us the first autopsy findings.

Marcelle – Maurice?

Ramirez – The official pathologist is on holiday in the Seychelles, so we called in the village doctor. Best to keep it among friends, isn't it?

Francine – I must go back to the hospital. My husband has just had another stroke. The doctors think a third might finish him off.

Marcelle – I hate to press you, but could Bernadette visit him too? You never know: a miracle might help.

Francine – Don't get your hopes up. His right side is already paralysed.

Marcelle – Even a very small miracle would do.

Francine – I'll see what I can do.

Sanchez – The doctor's got something important to say. And it's a big one.

Marcelle – We're listening, Doctor. Don't hold back.

Maurice *(to Francine)* – Strictly speaking it's medical confidentiality, but since we're all searching for the truth... your daughter is pregnant.

Marcelle – What on earth has that got to do with our investigation?

Maurice – How should I know? Ask Starsky and Hutch over there.

Sanchez – I meant his examination of the accident victim.

Francine – But who is the father?

Marcelle – Perhaps our investigation will reveal that, Francine. For now, this case is strictly confidential.

Francine goes. Everyone turns to Maurice.

Marcelle – Well?

Maurice – Oh, yes. Sorry. Only one body was found in the car, and the tests are conclusive: it wasn't human.

Marcelle – Don't tell me an alien was driving. Believe me, the only outsiders invading Bellecon aren't from Mars.

Maurice – Not an alien, no. The victim of the crash was... a dog.

Ramirez – A dog? Doctor, a dog can't drive a Renault Twingo!

Sanchez – That would certainly explain the accident.

Ramirez – Very strange. Have you identified the dog, Sanchez?

Sanchez – I've checked our files. No previous convictions, Chief.

Marcelle – Could it be the baroness's dog?

Sanchez – I doubt it. This dog still had both ears and a tail.

Ramirez – But someone posted the baroness's dog's ears and tail to her.

Marcelle – Come inside. I need a drink.

Ramirez – So do I. *(Sanchez moves to follow.)* Not you, Sanchez. Help the doctor identify the dog. He wasn't wearing a seatbelt, but he might have been wearing a collar.

Sanchez leaves with Maurice. Ramirez and Marcelle go inside. René arrives with Charles, carrying a painting.

René – Charles! I've finished your painting.

Charles – Already?

René – A flash of inspiration. It came to me like an apparition of the Virgin Mary.

Charles examines the painting. It depicts the Virgin Mary holding the infant Jesus.

Charles – That's nothing like the painting I ordered!

René – No, but it's much better!

Charles examines it again.

Charles – It's the best thing you've done in years. But since when were you interested in religion?

René – Age is turning me into a mystic.

Charles – And I'm not sure it's the right size for the fireplace...

René – Are you buying it or not? This is an original, not a cheap copy! I've painted so few pictures in my life that they'll be worth a fortune when I'm dead. Scarcity creates value!

Charles – All right. I'll take it.

Charles starts to leave with the painting.

René – What about my money?

Charles – Shall I write you a cheque?

René – I'd rather have cash.

Charles – I'll have to go to the bank.

René – Fine. You won't regret it. It's an investment.

Charles leaves. Dominique returns.

René – How's Bertrand?

Dominique – Better, unfortunately.

René – You mean fortunately, surely?

Dominique – Isn't that what I said?

René – You'll have to look for another house, then.

Dominique – Did you know the baroness sold her château under a life-annuity arrangement?

René – No. Who told you?

Dominique – Her notary.

René – Marcelle?

Dominique – An annuity deal! The buyer pays her while she's alive, then gets the château when she dies. Imagine that!

René – But who bought it?

Dominique – The buyer's name is a professional secret, according to Marcelle. But if the baroness is dead, you have to wonder who benefits. Have you voted?

René – Not yet. I'll go with you.

They leave. Ramirez and Marcelle come out of the bistro.

Marcelle – The mayor still hasn't returned from reporting to the police. I'm getting worried.

Ramirez – Perhaps they've kept him in.

Sanchez arrives.

Ramirez – Anything new, Sanchez?

Sanchez – The butcher has examined the ears and tail the baroness received in the post.

Marcelle – The butcher?

Ramirez – With the pathologist on holiday and the vet unavailable, we had to call Bellecon's halal butcher. He knows his meat.

Marcelle – And?

Sanchez – The evidence is conclusive. They came from a pig.

Marcelle – Good grief! So the baroness's dog really was a pig?

Ramirez – Or perhaps the Baroness de Stella-Artois was sent someone else's pig parts.

Sanchez – Her own dog, meanwhile, died at the wheel of a Twingo fitted with a Jaguar engine.

Marcelle – What a muddle! What do you make of it, Ramirez?

Ramirez – Perhaps someone tried to kill the baroness, and hit the dog by mistake. What if it had nothing to do with the election?

Marcelle – Then the kidnapping was just a diversion?

Ramirez – Could the attack on the Baroness de Guinness-Heineken have something to do with the sale of her château?

Marcelle – But where is the baroness?

Sanchez – Maybe she did die in the crash and someone removed her body.

Marcelle – Why?

Sanchez – Or perhaps the body simply vanished.

Marcelle – How?

Ramirez – Another mystery...

Sanchez – The car was her tomb. But the tomb is empty.

Claude comes out of the bistro and joins them. Sanchez's phone rings.

Sanchez – Yes? Thank you. *(He puts the phone away.)* We've had a tip-off. Someone claims to have spotted the baroness at a brothel in Marseille.

Marcelle – So she's alive! *(Turning to Ramirez.)* You're thinking something, Ramirez. Out with it.

Ramirez – An empty tomb... and the missing person turns up alive. Doesn't that ring any bells?

Marcelle – Not really...

Ramirez – The Resurrection of Christ!

Marcelle – Hmm. Perhaps it's linked to Bernadette seeing the Virgin Mary.

Sanchez – A new Joan of Arc! The baroness could drive the invaders out of France's Most Beautiful Village!

Marcelle – Joan of Bellecon! Think of the souvenir mugs and T-shirts.

Claude – Except Christ didn't reappear in a brothel, as far as I know.

Sanchez's phone rings.

Sanchez – Yes? No? You're sure? *(He hangs up.)* They've found the baroness. She was thrown clear of the car and ended up stuck in a plane tree. That's why nobody spotted her.

Marcelle – Is she badly hurt?

Sanchez – The tree was rotten. It didn't survive the impact.

Marcelle – I meant the baroness!

Sanchez – The firefighters are trying to extract her. But I'm afraid she met the same end as the tree.

Claude – At least the family can mourn her now.

Sanchez – It is unusual to lose an entire body in a road accident.

Marcelle checks her mobile.

Marcelle – And the mayor is still missing. The police station says he never turned up to report under his bail conditions.

Claude – Perhaps he's gone into hiding.

Ramirez – He's probably gone on the run. If he were sent to prison, he wouldn't be getting out in a hurry.

Everyone goes inside the bistro. Mario and Bernadette arrive.

Bernadette – I'd better get back to rehearsing my waitress part. So what are we going to do?

Mario – Do you love me?

Bernadette – Enough to be pregnant. Not enough to be sure you're the father.

Mario – I'll ask your mother for your hand.

Bernadette – I doubt she'll be pleased. She's been trying to marry me off to her bank manager so he'll ignore her overdraft. Why not kidnap me instead? Much more romantic.

Mario – Don't worry, princess. I'll find the perfect setting for you.

Bernadette – A setting? I'd settle for a ring.

Mario – You're the jewel, darling. And a princess deserves a château, doesn't she?

They kiss. Mario leaves. Bernadette goes into the bistro. Marcelle comes out with Ramirez.

Marcelle – The first-round results are in. The mayor is through to the run-off, but the baroness came first.

Ramirez – With the baroness dead, JR is back in with a chance.

Marcelle – He'll have the second round all to himself.

Ramirez – If we find him in time.

Marcelle – Otherwise Bellecon will be left without a mayor.

Ramirez – Anything could happen.

Charles rushes in, distraught.

Charles – My wife is dead!

Ramirez – Was she in the car too?

Charles – I forgot to tell her the pool was leaking. She dived in this morning. There wasn't a drop of water in it.

Ramirez – You have our deepest sympathy. But surely you can see we're dealing with more important matters?

Marcelle – The future of Bellecon is at stake! The fate of democracy itself!

Francine arrives.

Charles – Francine! I'm so glad to see you. I'm a widower now, you know.

Francine – What a coincidence! I'm a widow too. My husband choked on diet apple purée in hospital.

Marcelle – Choking on apple purée after his third stroke. That's almost a miracle.

Claude briefly appears.

Claude – Not one the Vatican would be keen to certify.

Marcelle and Ramirez go back inside. Mario arrives.

Francine – Mario, could you come round? I've got a leak at home.

Charles – Just like my swimming pool.

Mario – Of course, Madame.

Charles – I didn't know he was a plumber as well.

Francine – The boy can turn his hand to anything. If he weren't Romanian, he'd be the perfect son-in-law.

Mario – Actually, there's something I'd like to ask you...

Charles interrupts him.

Charles *(to Francine)* – Well, I'll take the plunge and hope I don't land on the bottom of an empty swimming pool. Are you free tonight?

Francine – Tonight and every night, Charles! I've been a widow for less than an hour. Just the man I needed to fill the hole in my bank account.

Charles and Francine leave. René arrives.

Mario – Where's my money?

René – I'll have it later, I promise.

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

René – I'm expecting a big payment today. I swear. Meanwhile, not a word to anyone, please.

Mario – No money tonight, and I tell everyone.

Mario and René go. Maurice arrives. Marcelle and Ramirez come out of the bistro.

Maurice – Just the people I was looking for.

Marcelle – Any news, Doctor?

Maurice – You could say that.

Marcelle – Go on, then.

Maurice – The firefighters have removed the body from the tree. I've had a first look at it.

Ramirez – Well? Spit it out.

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

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

Ramirez – I'm afraid I do.

Maurice – The baroness was a baron.

Ramirez – You mean the Baroness de Guinness-Kronenbourg was a man in disguise?

Marcelle – Good heavens! Perhaps it's as well she's dead. She came first in the election. Can you imagine France's most beautiful village governed by a Belgian baron in a dress?

Ramirez – We'd better go and have a look.

They leave. René and Dominique arrive.

René – I heard about Francine's husband.

Dominique – Terribly sad.

René – Will she sell the house, do you think?

Dominique – I'm going to make an offer.

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

Dominique – Yes. I gave him his last meal.

René – Which seems to have stuck in his throat.

Dominique – Apple purée can sometimes contain a pip or two.

Francine arrives, devastated. Claude comes out of the bistro.

Claude – We heard about your husband...

Dominique – Our condolences.

Francine – Yes, well...

Dominique – You look worried. Is there something else?

Francine – I've just discovered my daughter is pregnant.

Claude – Pregnant? That won't look good in the Miss Provence contest.

Dominique – Or at a pilgrimage to honour the Virgin.

Claude – Some days nothing goes right.

Dominique – Who's the father?

Francine – She says she doesn't know.

Claude – And I doubt the Holy Spirit had anything to do with it.

Dominique – Let me take you home. I'd like another look at the house. It's going to be a bit big for you now you're on your own.

Francine – Yes, but with Bernadette expecting a baby, we'll need another bedroom.

Dominique – Damn. I hadn't thought of that. We must find out who the father is.

They leave. Claude returns to the bistro. Marcelle enters with Ramirez and Sanchez.

Marcelle – I hardly dare ask if there's any more news.

Sanchez – I'm afraid there is.

Ramirez – The council's road maintenance department has run a DNA test on the remains in that tree.

Marcelle – And?

Ramirez – I think you'd better sit down.

Marcelle sits.

Sanchez – It's the mayor's DNA!

Marcelle – Could you explain that a little more clearly?

Sanchez – It was the mayor driving the baroness's car. He's the one who died.

Marcelle – But why was he dressed as the baroness?

Ramirez – Every time we solve one mystery, two more appear.

Sanchez – So it was the mayor who died, not the baroness.

Marcelle – Then the baroness will be our next mayor, because her opponent is dead!

Ramirez – At least the baroness may not be a man in drag, after all.

Marcelle – But where is she?

They go. René returns with Charles, who is carrying the painting. Claude comes out.

René – Have you got my money?

Charles – Yes, just a moment.

Claude – What on earth is that monstrosity?

Charles – René painted it. I'm having it framed.

René – Why? Do you know anything about painting?

Claude – In my line of work, you meet all sorts. My grandmother ran a brothel. Some of the greatest painters of her day were among her customers.

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

René – Next you'll tell us you're Van Gogh's illegitimate granddaughter.

Claude examines the picture.

Claude – This painting is from the beginning of the century. I can tell that much.

Charles – Which century?

Claude – Not this one, that's for certain.

Charles gives René a suspicious look.

René – What nonsense! I painted it myself!

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

Charles looks at René accusingly.

Charles – Shall I get an expert to look at it?

René – All right, I bought the old thing from Mario for fifty euros. I don't know where he got it.

Charles hands him the painting.

Charles – Lucky I hadn't paid you.

René – You sure you don't want it? It's exactly the right size for your fireplace.

Charles gives him a murderous look.

Charles – Count yourself lucky I don't call the police. It's probably stolen, too.

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

Charles leaves. Mario enters.

Mario – My money?

René – I haven't got it. But here's your painting back. The buyer backed out.

René hands the painting to Mario and leaves.

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

Claude takes the painting inside. Marcelle returns with Ramirez and Sanchez.

Ramirez – What about the mayor? Any plans for a proper send-off?

Marcelle – We'll give him a civic funeral. With luck, the government will award him a medal after his death, and everyone will forget his troubles with the law.

Ramirez holds up the local paper.

Ramirez – Finally some good news. Bellecon has been named the Most Beautiful Village in France!

Marcelle – The jury met at that Riviera hotel. With a little help from Madame Claude and her girls, the mayor made sure the judges enjoyed some very special hospitality.

Dominique returns.

Dominique – I hate to spoil the celebrations, but whoever bought the baroness's château on a life annuity might have a very good reason to want her dead.

Marcelle – I arranged the sale on someone's behalf. That's all.

Dominique – But you won't tell us who?

Marcelle – What are you suggesting?

Dominique – Perhaps you bought it yourself.

Marcelle advances on Dominique, threateningly.

Marcelle – I've told you I didn't!

Dominique – And now both leading candidates for mayor have vanished...

Marcelle – What about it?

Dominique – The deputy mayor would be very well placed to win a new election.

Dominique and Marcelle are about to come to blows.

Ramirez – Two suspects, two motives. *(His phone rings.)* And one policeman who never gets a moment's peace. Yes? All right. I'll tell her.

Marcelle abandons the confrontation, anxious to hear what Ramirez has learnt.

Marcelle – I'm afraid to ask.

Ramirez – The town hall's arts department has compared the mayor's DNA with the baroness's. They even checked their theatre subscriptions, just to be thorough.

Marcelle – And?

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

Marcelle – Believe it or not, nothing surprises me any more.

Dominique – I'm beginning to see what's happened...

Marcelle – I haven't the slightest idea.

Sanchez – The baroness was the mayor in a wig.

Ramirez – His double, you might say.

Marcelle – JR and the baroness? Like Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde?

Ramirez – With the baroness as his only opponent, he was bound to win under one identity or the other.

Sanchez – Whatever party was on the ballot paper.

Marcelle – A true unity candidate! Every political persuasion—and every other persuasion—all under one hat.

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

Dominique – Which leaves Bellecon without a mayor.

The mayor enters, preceded by an out-of-breath Maurice and followed by Charles, René and Mario. His damaged outfit is halfway between a mayor's suit and the baroness's flamboyant clothes.

Maurice – I may have been rather hasty with the death certificate. The mayor was merely knocked unconscious.

Mayor – As you see, I'm alive and well. Everything can return to normal. Your mayor's back. What could possibly go wrong now?

Dominique – I think you owe us an explanation.

Mayor – All right, I admit it. Yes, the Baroness de Carlsberg-Kronenbourg was me.

Charles – So you admit it?

Mayor – I invented her to collect the opposition votes. She was supposed to disappear between the two rounds, leaving the way clear for my re-election. Unfortunately, a few things went wrong...

Dominique – And the château, sold on a life-annuity deal? Who bought it?

Mayor – Mario.

Everyone looks at Mario.

Ramirez – Mario?

Mayor – A front man, nothing more. I was supposed to take back the château after the baroness disappeared.

Ramirez – And the château was paid for with the proceeds of corruption, no doubt.

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

Marcelle – But then there was the accident.

Ramirez – Perhaps somebody tampered with the car. With the mayor dead, Mario would get to keep the château.

Mario – And that's exactly what I'll do. Unless you want the whole story in tomorrow's papers.

René – You couldn't make this up. It would make a wonderful French farce.

Ramirez – I suggest we all agree on a friendly settlement and close the case.

Sanchez – A quiet settlement is better than a very public trial.

Mayor – We mustn't drag the name of France's Most Beautiful Village through the mud. After all, nobody of any political importance has died.

Marcelle – Fine. The baroness wins the election. End of story.

Mayor – The baroness? But the whole idea was to get rid of the baroness!

Marcelle – Don't push your luck, JR. We've already sent out your funeral announcements.

Maurice – Think yourself lucky. You'll have a magnificent funeral.

René – Perhaps we'll even put a statue of you in the village square, like a war hero!

Dominique – We'll take up a collection. People always speak well of the dead, especially when they don't have to elect them again.

Mayor – So I must stay dressed as the baroness for the rest of my life?

Maurice – Only until the end of your term.

Ramirez – Look on the bright side. You'll escape prosecution.

Sanchez – A fresh start. You could almost say you've made yourself a virgin again.

Mayor – But that means I'll have to switch political sides!

Marcelle – As if you haven't switched sides before. You've already switched genders; the politics should be easy.

Francine comes in from one side, Bernadette from the other.

Francine – Bernadette, darling!

Bernadette – Mum, Mario has something to tell you.

Mario – Madame, I formally ask for your daughter's hand in marriage.

Bernadette – He's probably the father of my child.

Dominique – Unless the father is one of the judges from the village beauty contest.

Mario – In any case, Francine, you're about to become a grandmother.

Francine – Grandmother? There's no need to be insulting.

Mario – I should mention that I now own the château at Bellecon.

Marcelle – She's still very much alive, but I'm sure the baroness will generously grant you the right to live in the château.

Francine – The château? Really?

Claude comes out with the painting.

Claude – I scraped away the top layer and found another painting underneath!

Charles – And?

Claude – You won't believe it.

Marcelle – Try us. Nothing would surprise me now.

Claude – It's signed Van Gogh!

René – Well, he did live around here for a while.

Charles – If it's genuine, it'll be worth a fortune.

Charles moves towards it, but Mario blocks his path.

Mario – The painting belongs to me, remember. You didn't want it.

Francine – I've always said Mario would make the ideal son-in-law. We'll hold the wedding at the château and invite the whole village!

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

The couple kiss. Wedding music plays.

Maurice – The marriage of a welfare cheque and a wealth-tax bill...

René – That's one way to end the class war in France's Most Beautiful Village.

Blackout. The Virgin Mary appears as a projected image. Blackout.

End

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

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 Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (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:

Monologues
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

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
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
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
Cards on the Table
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 Ways 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
Hangover
Happy Hour
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
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
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 ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches
Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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