

Cover to Cover

Farce · 9-character play · 7 women, 1 man, 1 either · 85 min · Advanced

Every Thursday, at Mireille's flat in Bordeaux, a book club discusses the novel of the month. Tonight its author, who writes under a pen name and whom nobody has ever seen, has promised to come. Not one of the seven readers has got to the end of it, the bathroom is leaking, and the plumber is due between six and ten. At eight o'clock sharp, the doorbell rings.

The living room of a large flat in Bordeaux overlooking the Garonne, on a Thursday evening in October, today.

Casting

MIREILLE (Female role, Senior) 71, widow of a wine merchant, founded the Thursday club in her flat twenty-three years ago.

BÉATRICE (Female role, Senior) 84, retired literature teacher, the club's senior member.

JUDITH (Female role, Senior) 67, retired gallery owner, Mireille's friend since school.

CLAIRE (Female role, Adult) 47, anaesthetist at the hospital, a club member for four years.

NINA (Female role, Adult) 33, bookseller at a big bookshop in the town centre, in the club for three months.

ELENA (Female role, Adult) 52, Mireille's daughter-in-law, club secretary, keeps the minute book.

ROSE (Female role, Adult) 58, retired night nurse, a club member for six years; brings the canelés.

JONAS (Male role, Adult) 46, plumber, called out that same morning for a leak.

CAMILLE (No gender marker, Adult) early thirties, handles events and contracts at Éditions de l'Estran, a small publisher in La Rochelle.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

(Mireille's living room. Five doors: the front door, onto the landing; the kitchen; the bathroom, which connects to Mireille's bedroom; Mireille's bedroom; the guest room. Armchairs in a circle around one taller armchair, empty. A clock that has stopped. On the coffee table, a stack of identical books. Elena sets out glasses, a notebook under her arm. Mireille comes out of the bathroom with a bucket.)

MIREILLE. One drop every four seconds. I counted.

ELENA. And the plumber?

MIREILLE. "Between six and ten." That's what they told me this morning on the phone. Between six and ten. Like the tide.

ELENA. It's quarter to seven.

MIREILLE. Then he's late for six and early for ten. He's exactly halfway through being late.

(She puts the bucket down by the bathroom door, looks at it, carries it back into the bathroom, comes out without it.)

MIREILLE. Nobody goes into the bathroom tonight.

ELENA. Somebody always goes into the bathroom.

MIREILLE. Then she'll see the bucket, and she'll have the decency not to see it.

ELENA. Have you got it on you, the letter?

(Mireille takes an envelope out of her pocket and unfolds it with care.)

MIREILLE. I never let it out of my sight. "Dear Madam, I accept your invitation to your club on Thursday at eight p.m. I shall come alone. I ask only one thing: tell no one, not the papers, not my publishers. I would like an ordinary evening. Marthe Lestey."

ELENA. An ordinary evening.

MIREILLE. There has never been an ordinary evening in this room. Paul would never have allowed it.

ELENA. How did it come, this letter? In the post?

MIREILLE. In my letterbox. No stamp.

ELENA. No stamp?

MIREILLE. Delivered by hand, Elena. She pushed open the door of this building. She stood in my hall, next to the Lamberts' bicycles.

ELENA. So she lives in Bordeaux. Or in the building.

MIREILLE. I know everyone in this building. There are no writers. There are the Lamberts, a dentist, and Rose.

ELENA. Then she has someone to deliver her letters.

MIREILLE. Real writers always have someone.

ELENA. And the green ink?

MIREILLE. Real writers write in green. Blue is for cheques.

(She puts the letter in her pocket, takes it out again to place it in full view on the table, then puts it back in her pocket.)

ELENA. So you haven't told anyone.

MIREILLE. No one.

(A pause.)

MIREILLE. I only rang La Rochelle.

ELENA. The publisher?

MIREILLE. To get some signed copies. You don't invite a writer without telling the people who feed her. It's good manners.

ELENA. She wrote "not my publishers".

MIREILLE. Out of modesty. They said they'd try to send someone. No one will come. It's two hours by train, and it's raining all along the coast.

(Mireille goes out to the kitchen. Elena pulls a tape measure out of her bag, measures the wall at top speed, jots a figure in the notebook. Mireille comes back with an empty plate. Elena slips the tape measure between two pages.)

MIREILLE. What are you doing?

ELENA. Counting the chairs.

MIREILLE. There are nine. There have always been nine. Seven for us, one for the guest, and Paul's.

ELENA. Thomas called, at lunchtime.

MIREILLE. Has your husband got another retirement home to show me? A room with a red button over the bed and card games on Wednesdays?

ELENA. He says the flat is too big for you.

MIREILLE. It's too big for him. He never stays long enough to get all the way round it.

(Elena opens the notebook.)

ELENA. For tonight's minutes. "The Keeper of the Estuary." Who chose this month's book?

MIREILLE. I did.

ELENA. The September minutes say: "Suggested by Rose."

MIREILLE. Rose suggested it. I chose it. Anyone can suggest. Choosing is a profession.

ELENA. So what do I put?

MIREILLE. You put "chosen by Mireille". And have you finished it?

ELENA. I'm on page two hundred and eighty-seven.

MIREILLE. Good. Very good. And?

ELENA. And there's the lighthouse, the storm, the sick father, the girl mending the lamp. There's a lot of wind.

MIREILLE. That's the estuary.

ELENA. And you?

MIREILLE. Twice.

ELENA. Twice?

MIREILLE. The second time for the details.

(The doorbell. Mireille fixes her hair, Elena shuts the notebook on the tape measure. Mireille opens the door.)

SCENE 2

(Béatrice comes in on Judith's arm, a walking stick in her other hand, the book clutched to her chest. Judith carries a bottle of wine.)

JUDITH. She insisted on walking up.

BÉATRICE. Four floors is a chapter. One doesn't skip chapters.

MIREILLE. Béatrice, there's a lift.

BÉATRICE. The lift is the abridged version. I have never taken the abridged version in my life.

(Béatrice sits in the tallest armchair. Mireille looks at her, Elena looks at her.)

ELENA. Béatrice, that chair is for her.

BÉATRICE. I'll give it back. I'm warming it up.

JUDITH. She's not here?

MIREILLE. Eight o'clock. She wrote eight o'clock.

JUDITH. It's seven. You've got us here an hour early?

MIREILLE. So that we're ready. So that we agree.

JUDITH. Agree on what? We've read it.

MIREILLE. On the order of the questions. We're not going to pounce on her like it's the Capucins market.

BÉATRICE. I have only one question. I have asked it of every author since 1971. "Why?"

ELENA. And what do they answer?

BÉATRICE. Generally, they ask where the toilet is.

(Judith holds the bottle out to Elena.)

JUDITH. From my cousin's estate. He doesn't sell it, he gives it to people who understand.

BÉATRICE. Elena, dear, what does it say on that label? They print smaller and smaller. It's so that we drink without knowing.

ELENA. "Grand vin de Bordeaux."

BÉATRICE. They didn't dare put anything else.

(Judith walks round the room, sniffing.)

JUDITH. It smells damp in here.

MIREILLE. A leak, in the bathroom. The plumber's coming between six and ten.

JUDITH. They all say that. They never come. Or they come on a Sunday, with an apprentice chewing something.

MIREILLE. Talk to me about the book instead.

JUDITH. What turned me inside out was the ending.

MIREILLE. The ending, yes.

JUDITH. "And she poured the tea, as she did every Thursday, without anyone looking at her."

(A pause.)

BÉATRICE. That says it all.

JUDITH. All of it. Six hundred pages to get to that cup of tea.

MIREILLE. Six hundred and twelve.

JUDITH. You counted them?

MIREILLE. I read them. Twice.

JUDITH. And the scene in the middle? You know. The one where...

MIREILLE. Oh. That one.

JUDITH. Yes.

MIREILLE. Unforgettable.

JUDITH. I didn't sleep a wink.

MIREILLE. Neither did I. I had to get up again.

JUDITH. To do what?

MIREILLE. To read it again.

(A pause. They take a sip at the same moment.)

BÉATRICE. The lighthouse is the mother.

JUDITH. Obviously.

MIREILLE. Obviously.

ELENA. Why is it the mother?

BÉATRICE. Because it gives light and nobody ever looks at it. In every great novel, the lighthouse is the mother.

ELENA. There's a lighthouse in every great novel?

BÉATRICE. In the ones worth anything, there is. Sometimes it's disguised as a cathedral.

JUDITH. What I love about Marthe Lestey is that she doesn't write for everybody. My cleaning lady bought it. I saw it sticking out of her bag. I almost didn't finish it.

ELENA. Because she'd bought it?

JUDITH. I do wonder what she gets out of it. A phrase like "without anyone looking at her", you have to have lived to hear it.

BÉATRICE. I read it in one night.

ELENA. Six hundred and twelve pages?

BÉATRICE. At my age, the nights are long. And the pages are short.

JUDITH. And Rose, is she coming?

MIREILLE. Rose comes every Thursday.

JUDITH. Yes, but tonight. Someone should ask her not to speak. She'll ask the author whether she writes in the morning or the evening.

BÉATRICE. It's a good question.

JUDITH. It's a waiting-room question.

BÉATRICE. I'm the one who brought Rose to you, six years ago. I have never regretted it.

JUDITH. Nobody's blamed you for it, Béatrice.

BÉATRICE. You blame me every Thursday. With your eyebrows.

(The doorbell. Elena goes to open.)

SCENE 3

(Claire comes in, a hospital badge still clipped to her jacket, her phone in her hand. Behind her, Nina, her arms full of identical books, each wrapped in a red band.)

CLAIRE. I can't stay long. I'm on call.

JUDITH. You're on call every Thursday.

CLAIRE. People have operations on Thursdays. It's statistical. If the hospital calls at half past nine, I leave, I'm warning you now.

JUDITH. It always calls at half past nine, your hospital.

CLAIRE. Emergencies are very punctual.

NINA. Good evening. I brought some more, in case she wants to sign them. We've put them in the window, with my staff pick.

JUDITH. Your what?

(Nina pulls a book from the pile and shows the band.)

NINA. The bookshop's staff pick. I wrote it. We've sold three hundred.

MIREILLE. Read it to us.

NINA. "A lighthouse, a storm, a young girl alone facing the sea. The novel of the year. Nina, bookseller."

JUDITH. That's the back cover.

NINA. I summed it up.

JUDITH. It was three lines.

NINA. I made it two.

BÉATRICE. Shortening is a craft.

(Elena opens the notebook on the table and holds out a pen.)

ELENA. The attendance page, please. One signature each. Tonight is historic.

(Claire signs, Nina signs, Judith signs, Béatrice signs without looking at the page, from a great height. The doorbell. Mireille opens. Rose comes in, a cardboard box in her arms.)

ROSE. Good evening. They're still warm.

JUDITH. You live two floors down, Rose, and you're the last to arrive.

ROSE. They were baking.

MIREILLE. Put them in the kitchen, Rose. We'll bring them out afterwards.

ROSE. After what?

MIREILLE. After her.

(Rose puts the box on the table, takes a pen from her pocket and signs the notebook.)

ELENA. Rose, you've got a schoolteacher's handwriting. All round. You could read it from the other end of the table.

ROSE. It's the pen. A hospital pen. Thirty years of nights, and I never gave a single one back.

CLAIRE. So it's you.

ROSE. The stationery cupboard is still looking for me.

MIREILLE. Right. Now that we're all here, listen to me. She arrives at eight. I welcome her. I introduce her. Béatrice asks the first question.

BÉATRICE. "Why?"

MIREILLE. Then Judith, on style. Then Claire, on the father's illness, since you're a doctor.

CLAIRE. What's wrong with him, the father?

MIREILLE. You've read it.

CLAIRE. Of course. I wanted to check we had the same diagnosis.

MIREILLE. Then Elena, for the minutes. Nina listens, since she's on probation.

NINA. I'm on probation until when, exactly?

MIREILLE. Until someone important speaks to you, here, in this room. That's the rule.

NINA. Who made the rule?

MIREILLE. I did.

NINA. And who's important?

JUDITH. Tonight, one person.

NINA. And if she doesn't speak to me?

MIREILLE. There'll be other authors.

CLAIRE. In twenty-three years, there hasn't been a single one.

MIREILLE. All the more reason. They're overdue.

NINA. Can I ask a little question?

MIREILLE. At the end. And Rose...

ROSE. I smile.

MIREILLE. That's it. Perfect.

ROSE. I'll just warn you: I stopped at page three hundred.

(A silence. Everyone looks at her.)

JUDITH. Stopped?

ROSE. It happens.

JUDITH. Not here.

MIREILLE. Rose, if she asks you how far you've got, you say you've read it twice.

ROSE. And if she asks me what I liked best?

MIREILLE. The wind. Everybody liked the wind.

NINA. Can I ask my little question right now? So I'm sure not to say anything stupid in front of her.

MIREILLE. Go on.

NINA. At the end, "she poured the tea". Who's she?

(A pause. Claire glances at her phone.)

JUDITH. Aurore.

BÉATRICE. The mother.

MIREILLE. The keeper.

CLAIRE. The customs man's widow.

(Everyone looks at Claire.)

CLAIRE. That's one way of looking at it.

ELENA. Aurore is the keeper. And the mother dies on page four.

BÉATRICE. That's why it's her. Dead women always pour the tea, in great novels.

NINA. So it's Aurore.

JUDITH. Of course it's Aurore.

MIREILLE. So there is tea, at the lighthouse.

ELENA. I haven't got to the tea yet.

(The stopped clock still says ten past four. Mireille looks at her watch.)

MIREILLE. Quarter past seven. Forty-five minutes.

(A pause. Nobody moves.)

MIREILLE. I'll fetch the napkins.

CLAIRE. I'm going to wash my hands. The hospital.

NINA. Can I put my coat somewhere?

ELENA. In the guest room. I'll show you.

JUDITH. I'm going to look at your view of the Garonne, Mireille. I miss your view.

MIREILLE. The Garonne is this way.

JUDITH. I'll see it better from the guest room.

SCENE 4

(Mireille goes into her bedroom. Claire goes into the bathroom. Elena, Nina and Judith vanish into the guest room. The doors close one after another. Béatrice stays in the tall armchair. Rose opens her box and lines the canelés up on the plate.)

BÉATRICE. They've gone off to read.

ROSE. They've gone off to put their coats down.

BÉATRICE. Claire didn't have a coat.

(A pause.)

BÉATRICE. Rose. That one, you didn't read it to me, on Tuesdays.

ROSE. No.

BÉATRICE. You read me the one about the bees. You read me the Russian, all of it, with all his cousins. You even read me Judith's, the one she wrote about her gallery, and I hadn't asked you to.

ROSE. You fell asleep on page ten.

BÉATRICE. Out of politeness. But that one, no. Why?

ROSE. That one, I couldn't.

BÉATRICE. Were you afraid of the wind?

ROSE. My voice wouldn't come. It stopped in my throat, like when you swallow a pill the wrong way.

BÉATRICE. And in forty minutes, a woman is going to sit in this chair and ask me what I think of it. Tell me. Quickly. Up to your page three hundred.

ROSE. There's an island in the middle of the water, where the Gironde turns into the sea. On the island, a lighthouse. In the lighthouse, a keeper and his daughter. Her name is Aurore. She's fourteen. She mends everything that breaks: the windows, the pumps, the lamp, the coffee grinder. One winter, her father falls ill. He can't climb any more. So she climbs. Three hundred and eleven steps, every evening. She counts them, because her father counted them. She lights the lamp. And nobody, all along the coast, knows that it's a child holding up the light.

(A pause.)

BÉATRICE. You tell it as if you'd been there.

ROSE. My father worked on the estuary. The buoys, the beacons. He mended everything that floated. And whatever didn't float any more, he mended that too, for the pleasure of it.

BÉATRICE. Three hundred and eleven steps.

ROSE. That's what it says.

BÉATRICE. I'll say: "Why three hundred and eleven?" That will sound very good.

(The guest room door opens. Elena is pushed out, her notebook against her

chest. The door closes behind her.)

ELENA. I only wanted to show you the wardrobe!

(No answer. Elena looks at Béatrice, who has closed her eyes, then at Rose, who is looking at her. She takes out the tape measure and measures the living-room wall, very fast, on her knees.)

ROSE. Four metres sixty.

(Elena freezes.)

ROSE. I worked it out last year, for the Christmas tree. Mireille wanted to know if it would fit.

ELENA. It's for Thomas. He wants figures. For the estate agent.

ROSE. I won't say a word.

ELENA. He says she can't go on living here alone. That the living room is forty square metres for one person.

ROSE. On Thursdays, there are eight of us in it.

ELENA. He doesn't come on Thursdays.

(Mireille's bedroom door opens. Mireille comes out, a printed sheet in her hand, glasses on her nose. She sees Elena on her knees.)

MIREILLE. What are you doing on the floor?

ELENA. Looking for an earring.

MIREILLE. You don't wear earrings.

ELENA. That's why I'm looking.

(Mireille looks at Elena, looks at the sheet, folds it in four and slips it into the book on Béatrice's lap.)

MIREILLE. Béatrice, I've put a bookmark in for you.

BÉATRICE. Thank you. I lose them all.

MIREILLE. The napkins. I can't find the napkins.

ROSE. They're in the bathroom. In the blue cupboard.

MIREILLE. How do you know that?

ROSE. I've been folding them after you for six years.

(Mireille heads for the bathroom. The door opens before she reaches it. Claire comes out, her phone pressed to her ear, her other hand wet.)

CLAIRE. The customs man, in the mud, fine. The widow. A detective. Thanks, yes. Good shift.

(She hangs up. She sees everyone.)

CLAIRE. The hospital. An emergency. It's sorted.

MIREILLE. A customs man in the mud?

CLAIRE. It's a figure of speech, in intensive care. Mireille, your bucket's overflowing.

MIREILLE. It can't be overflowing, I emptied it at six.

CLAIRE. It hasn't read your watch.

(Mireille hurries into the bathroom. Claire sits down, picks up her phone again and reads at top speed, moving her lips. Béatrice opens one eye, opens her book, finds the folded sheet and holds it out to Rose.)

BÉATRICE. Rose, what's that fallen from the sky?

ROSE. "Study notes. The Keepers of the Estuary. Summary in ten points. Point one: Lucien, a young customs officer, arrives on the island of the Cordouan lighthouse."

CLAIRE. Lucien?

ROSE. "Point two: the storm."

BÉATRICE. Give me that.

(Béatrice takes the sheet, holds it at arm's length, then very close, then slides it under her cushion.)

BÉATRICE. I'll read it later. I've forgotten my other glasses.

(The guest room door opens. Judith comes out with a newspaper cutting in her hand, which she stuffs into her bag. Nina follows her, the book open at the back cover.)

JUDITH. Nina was getting changed.

NINA. I wasn't getting changed.

JUDITH. Then she was doing her hair.

NINA. You were reading a newspaper.

JUDITH. I was looking at the Garonne through a newspaper. There's a glare, in the evening.

(Mireille comes out of the bathroom, the bucket in her hand, her sleeves wet.)

MIREILLE. It wasn't overflowing. It was half empty.

CLAIRE. Or half full. That's one way of looking at it.

(Mireille puts the bucket back in the bathroom, shuts the door and leans against it.)

MIREILLE. Right. Nobody leaves this room again.

SCENE 5

(They are all in the living room. Mireille, leaning against the bathroom door, counts them with her eyes.)

MIREILLE. We have twenty minutes left. Let us agree on one single thing. The customs man.

ELENA. What customs man?

MIREILLE. Lucien. She loves him, he loves her, they love each other across the sea.

CLAIRE. He dies.

MIREILLE. He marries her.

CLAIRE. They find him in the mud, head first. There's a widow. And a detective.

MIREILLE. There is no detective in this book. It's a literary book.

CLAIRE. Detectives read too.

ELENA. I'm on page two hundred and eighty-seven, and I haven't seen any Lucien.

MIREILLE. He turns up on page two hundred and eighty-eight.

ELENA. And when does he die?

CLAIRE. Two hundred and eighty-nine.

ELENA. That's quick, for a wedding.

JUDITH. You're all missing the point. Lucien doesn't exist. Lucien is a metaphor.

NINA. A metaphor for what?

(Judith takes the cutting out of her bag, unfolds it, reads.)

JUDITH. "In this novel, the light is a character, and the sea a blank page that the keeper fills every night."

BÉATRICE. That's very beautiful.

NINA. What does it mean?

JUDITH. That it's a novel about writing. All great novels are novels about writing.

BÉATRICE. Or about the mother.

JUDITH. The mother is writing.

BÉATRICE. Then we agree.

NINA. But on the staff pick, I wrote "a young girl alone facing the sea".

MIREILLE. She isn't alone, she has Lucien.

CLAIRE. Lucien's in the mud.

JUDITH. Lucien is a metaphor.

ELENA. Lucien is not in the book!

(Silence. They turn to Rose, who is pouring water into the teapot.)

MIREILLE. Rose. Page three hundred. Did you see a Lucien?

ROSE. I didn't see a Lucien.

JUDITH. Rose didn't see Lucien, Rose stopped.

BÉATRICE. Why three hundred and eleven steps?

MIREILLE. What?

BÉATRICE. That's my question. I ask it straight after "why". It makes an impression.

MIREILLE. Right. Here is what we know. Lucien exists. He's wounded, not dead. And he's a metaphor.

CLAIRE. Wounded where?

MIREILLE. In the mud.

CLAIRE. Works for me.

ELENA. "After a lively discussion, the club comes to an agreement about Lucien."

MIREILLE. Now, places. Each of you in her chair, the book on your lap, open. Not at the beginning, that looks like a schoolgirl. Not at the end, that looks pretentious. Two thirds of the way in.

(They all open their books two thirds of the way in. Nina counts the pages at top speed.)

NINA. Two thirds of six hundred and twelve is...

JUDITH. Open it anywhere, with confidence.

(Rose gets up with the teapot.)

ROSE. I'll put the kettle on. She might like a cup of tea.

MIREILLE. She'll like a great wine, Rose. You heard Judith.

ROSE. Or a tea. Like at the end.

(Rose goes into the kitchen. Eight o'clock strikes from a church tower in the distance. They freeze in their chairs. The doorbell. Mireille stands, smooths her dress, opens the door. Jonas is on the landing, a big canvas bag on his shoulder, a metal case in his hand.)

JONAS. Good evening. Is this Mireille's? Fourth floor?

MIREILLE. Come in. Come in. Don't say a word.

JONAS. They told me it was urgent.

MIREILLE. Urgent! We've been waiting for you for six months.

JONAS. Six months, no. They called me this morning.

MIREILLE. This morning, I rang La Rochelle, yes. They told you? Have you come with her?

JONAS. With who?

(Nina stands up, her book in her hand.)

NINA. With Marthe Lestey.

(Jonas sees the book in Nina's hands, then the pile on the table.)

JONAS. You read that? All of you?

MIREILLE. We have all read it.

JONAS. It's the most beautiful book I've ever opened. It's in my van. I take it everywhere.

JUDITH. He takes it everywhere.

NINA. It's you? You're Marthe Lestey?

JONAS. Me?

MIREILLE. A pen name. Of course.

JUDITH. Marthe Lestey is a man.

BÉATRICE. I always said so.

CLAIRE. That explains the father's illness.

ELENA. Explains what?

CLAIRE. I don't know. But it explains it.

JONAS. Wait. No. I'm here for...

MIREILLE. For an ordinary evening. We know. You wrote it.

JONAS. I wrote it?

MIREILLE. In green.

JONAS. I do write, yes. A bit. In the evenings. But...

(Judith takes Mireille by the arm and speaks to her in a low voice, loud enough for everyone to hear.)

JUDITH. And your plumber still hasn't come. People like that can't read a clock. Or anything else, for that matter.

(A pause. Jonas looks at Judith. He sets his case down on the rug, slowly.)

BÉATRICE. You travel with your manuscripts?

JONAS. With my tools.

BÉATRICE. The tools of the writer. One needs an iron case, these days.

JONAS. You're quite right, madam. People like that don't read a thing.

(He holds out his hand to Mireille.)

JONAS. My name is Jonas. Marthe is for the books.

(They applaud. Rose comes out of the kitchen with the teapot. She sees Jonas, then the case on the rug. She stops.)

MIREILLE. Rose! This is Marthe Lestey.

(Rose puts the teapot down. She picks up the plate of canelés and holds it out to Jonas.)

ROSE. Good evening.

(Jonas takes a canelé.)

JONAS. It's warm.

ROSE. They're always warm.

(Blackout.)

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

(The living room, a few minutes later. Jonas sits in the tall armchair, a glass of wine in his hand. His case and his bag are at his feet. The seven sit in a circle round him, each with the book open two thirds of the way in on her lap. Elena holds the notebook.)

(Mireille hands the letter to Jonas.)

MIREILLE. Your letter. I never let it out of my sight.

(Jonas reads it. He reads it again. He hands it back.)

JONAS. It's well written.

JUDITH. He's modest.

MIREILLE. We have a tradition. Our senior member asks the first question.

(Béatrice draws herself up.)

BÉATRICE. Why?

(A pause. Jonas looks at his glass.)

JONAS. Why what?

BÉATRICE. Why.

JONAS. Because the lamp was going out.

(A silence.)

BÉATRICE. Ah.

JUDITH. Ah.

ELENA. "Because the lamp was going out."

BÉATRICE. And why three hundred and eleven steps?

JONAS. I went up it, out there, last summer. On the shuttle boat that leaves from the point. I didn't count the same. But in the book, she counts three hundred and eleven. I think the extra steps are the ones she climbs for her father.

BÉATRICE. He's almost in tears.

JUDITH. Style, now. Your sentences are so short. So dry. Is it a refusal of lyricism?

JONAS. It's that they have to hold. A sentence is like a pipe joint. Too tight, it cracks. Not tight enough, it leaks.

(Judith takes out a little notebook and writes.)

JUDITH. "Too tight, it cracks. Not tight enough, it leaks."

CLAIRE. The father's illness. I'm a doctor. I'd say: the heart.

JONAS. The lungs. The cold, the salt, the smoke from the lamp. Page a hundred and forty, he coughs on the lens and she wipes the lens before she sees to him.

CLAIRE. That's what I thought. The lungs, and a little bit the heart.

MIREILLE. And Lucien?

JONAS. Who?

MIREILLE. The customs man.

JONAS. There is no customs man.

ELENA. Thank you!

MIREILLE. It's a metaphor.

NINA. Wait. Lucien. The customs man. The mud. That's... "The Keepers of the Estuary". Plural.

JUDITH. What's that?

NINA. A crime novel. Came out the same month. Both publishers used the same photo of the lighthouse on the cover. We shelve them side by side, in the local section, and... well, people get them mixed up. Every day. In the crime novel, Lucien is a customs officer, and he dies on page two hundred and eighty-nine. I think.

CLAIRE. Two hundred and eighty-nine. I said so.

MIREILLE. So it's the metaphor from another book.

JONAS. There's a boy who brings the post by rowing boat, on Tuesdays. He hasn't got a name. He's got a dog.

CLAIRE. And the dog, does he end up in the mud?

JONAS. The dog is perfectly fine.

(Jonas looks up at the stopped clock. He looks at it for a long time.)

JONAS. Your clock has stopped.

MIREILLE. Since my husband died. Ten past four. Nobody touches it.

JONAS. Ten past four.

MIREILLE. You think it's ridiculous.

JONAS. No. I think it's... I've seen it somewhere before.

JUDITH. All stopped clocks look alike. That's their charm.

(Jonas's phone rings. He looks at the screen and stands up.)

JONAS. Sorry. It's my publisher.

(He moves a few steps away, towards the window. They all fall silent to listen.)

JONAS. Yes. No, I'm on site. No, I haven't started on the seal yet. The U-bend? I'll look at the U-bend after. Yes, I know she called this morning. I'm dealing with it. The job sheet'll be signed, yes. Tonight. Yes, boss.

(He hangs up.)

NINA. He calls his publisher "boss".

MIREILLE. It's the custom, in La Rochelle.

JUDITH. The U-bend.

BÉATRICE. He means the second part.

NINA. What's the U-bend, in a novel?

JONAS. It's the place where everything you've thrown away ends up coming back.

JUDITH. Sublime.

(She writes in her little notebook.)

ELENA. And the seal?

JONAS. The seal is what stops things getting out. When it's worn, it drips. One drop every four seconds. At first, you don't hear it. And then it's all you can hear.

(A silence. Mireille looks towards the bathroom door.)

CLAIRE. I can hear it.

MIREILLE. It's nothing. It's the neighbours.

NINA. Can I ask my little question? I'm on probation, so I ask it at the end, but this is sort of the end.

MIREILLE. Nina.

JONAS. Go ahead.

NINA. The red band, on your book. "The novel of the year." I wrote that. Have you seen it?

JONAS. I've seen it.

NINA. And?

JONAS. I took it off. It was hiding the drawing of the lighthouse.

NINA. Oh.

JONAS. And it said "a young girl alone facing the sea". She isn't facing the sea. She's got her back to it. She watches the coast, all night, to see if anyone is watching her light.

NINA. I sold three hundred.

JONAS. Then three hundred people took the band off.

NINA. He spoke to me.

MIREILLE. That doesn't count. It was to contradict you.

(Nina takes the band off her copy, folds it and puts it in her pocket.)

ELENA. I've got a question too. For the minutes. How long did it take you to write it?

JONAS. I don't know. How long do you think it takes to write it?

ELENA. I don't know. I didn't write it.

JONAS. I don't know either. You don't count, when it's coming.

ELENA. "Doesn't count."

(Jonas turns to Rose, who hasn't said anything.)

JONAS. And you? You haven't asked anything.

ROSE. I smile.

JONAS. That's not a question.

ROSE. Do you write in the morning or the evening?

(Judith closes her eyes.)

JONAS. The evening. In the van. Between two jobs.

ROSE. The van's good. Nobody knocks.

MIREILLE. Rose, you don't have to give your opinion.

ROSE. I wasn't giving my opinion. I was talking about the van.

(Jonas stands up and picks up his case.)

JONAS. Where's the bathroom?

MIREILLE. Not the bathroom!

JONAS. Sorry?

MIREILLE. There's a bucket.

JONAS. I'm used to buckets.

(Jonas goes into the bathroom with his case. The door closes. Rose stands up and takes a folded towel from the back of an armchair.)

ROSE. I'll take him a towel.

(Rose goes into the bathroom and shuts the door behind her.)

SCENE 2

(The six look at one another. Mireille stands up.)

MIREILLE. The kitchen. All of you. Right now.

JUDITH. What for?

MIREILLE. To decide who takes him to dinner afterwards. We're not going to talk about it in front of him.

(They all go out into the kitchen, Béatrice last, leaning on her stick. The door closes. The living room is empty. The bathroom door opens. Jonas comes out, sleeves rolled up. Rose follows him, the towel over her shoulder.)

JONAS. You know.

ROSE. The case. And your hands. A writer doesn't have plumber's putty under his nails. He has ink.

JONAS. I'm going to tell them. Now.

ROSE. Why?

JONAS. Because it's not true. And the real one's going to ring the bell any minute.

ROSE. She won't come.

JONAS. How do you know?

ROSE. Believe me. A woman who writes "I would like an ordinary evening" climbs four floors, hears through the door that they're arguing about a customs man who doesn't exist, and goes back down.

JONAS. You know her?

ROSE. I know the stairs.

(A pause.)

JONAS. And why do you want me to carry on?

ROSE. Because I'd like to hear what people say to a writer. I've been listening to them talk about books for six years. Never in front of someone who wrote one.

JONAS. I haven't written one.

ROSE. You've read it. That's already more than anyone in that kitchen.

JONAS. You've read it too.

ROSE. Up to page three hundred.

JONAS. Why did you stop there? That's where it really starts.

ROSE. That's where it turns into something else.

JONAS. The first time, I thought there were pages missing. Page three hundred and one, no more lighthouse, no more sea. A city. A flat, with...

ROSE. Don't tell me. I want to keep the ending for myself.

(She takes the toolbox out of Jonas's hands.)

ROSE. I'll take care of the seal.

JONAS. You know how?

ROSE. My father mended the buoys on the estuary, I told you.

JONAS. You haven't told me anything.

ROSE. Then I told someone else. And a night nurse changes more seals than you'd think. At four in the morning, there's nobody else to call.

JONAS. My boss wants the job sheet, signed by the customer. Otherwise I don't get paid, and neither does he.

ROSE. Where is it, this sheet?

JONAS. In the lid of the case. You write down what you did, the time, the part you changed. The customer signs at the bottom.

(Rose takes her green pen out of her pocket.)

ROSE. I'll write it.

JONAS. And what do I do?

ROSE. You're Marthe Lestey. When you know, you answer. When you don't, you talk about plumbing. They love it.

JONAS. And if they ask me about myself? My life, my mother, my childhood?

ROSE. Nobody will ask you about yourself. They'll ask you about themselves.

(A pause. Jonas looks at his canvas bag.)

JONAS. I've got one, you know. A real one. That I really wrote. In the van, in the evenings.

ROSE. What's it about?

JONAS. Plumbing. Well, about people whose homes you go into. You see their bathrooms, you know everything about them in ten minutes, and you leave without them ever knowing your first name.

ROSE. Have you sent it off?

JONAS. Eleven times. Eleven rejections.

ROSE. Eleven is nothing.

JONAS. What would you know about it?

ROSE. I can count. I did night shifts for thirty years: you count everything, the drips, the hours, the letters that come back.

(The kitchen door opens a crack. Voices. Rose goes into the bathroom with the case and shuts the door. Jonas sits back down in the tall armchair and picks up his glass.)

SCENE 3

(The six come back from the kitchen, Mireille in the lead.)

MIREILLE. We've voted. After the session, we're taking you to dinner, at the restaurant on the quay. They've kept a table for us for twenty-three years.

JONAS. I have to get home early. I've got work tomorrow, at seven.

JUDITH. Work.

BÉATRICE. The great ones always say “work”. The little ones say “my project”.

CLAIRE. I’m leaving at half past nine anyway. I’m on call.

MIREILLE. You’re not leaving before the signing.

CLAIRE. If the hospital calls...

MIREILLE. The hospital will call after the signing.

(Mireille looks around.)

MIREILLE. Where’s Rose?

JONAS. She’s lying down. In your bedroom.

MIREILLE. In my bedroom?

JONAS. A dizzy spell. She said it would pass.

MIREILLE. Rose has never had a dizzy spell. In six years, she’s never had anything at all.

CLAIRE. I’ll go and see her. I’m a doctor.

JONAS. She said: whatever you do, no doctors.

CLAIRE. That, I understand.

JUDITH. She always leaves at the wrong moment. One day she’ll walk out in the middle of a sentence.

(Mireille’s phone buzzes. She puts on her glasses and reads.)

MIREILLE. “I’m at Saint-Jean station. I’ll be there in twenty minutes. Don’t tell the author, I’d like it to be a surprise. Camille, Éditions de l’Estran.”

(She looks up from the screen.)

MIREILLE. Your publishers! They’ve come all the way from La Rochelle!

JONAS. Here?

MIREILLE. I shouldn’t have told you. It’s a surprise.

JONAS. In twenty minutes?

MIREILLE. Nineteen.

NINA. You don't look pleased.

JONAS. They've never seen me.

NINA. Your publishers have never seen you?

JONAS. Never. Letters. A PO box. That was the condition. It's in all the papers: nobody has ever seen me. I'm a very private woman.

(A pause.)

JUDITH. You said "woman".

JONAS. Habit. With the pen name. After a while, you get in touch with your feminine side.

BÉATRICE. That's very beautiful, too.

ELENA. "In touch with the feminine side."

JUDITH. Then I must give you something before La Rochelle carries you off. My bag is in the guest room.

ELENA. I'll come with you.

JUDITH. I know where my bag is.

ELENA. I know where the room is.

(Judith and Elena go out into the guest room. Mireille moves closer to Jonas. The others pretend to read.)

MIREILLE. You know, this club has existed for twenty-three years. We've read two hundred and seventy books. We've never had a guest. You are our first man of letters.

JONAS. Woman of letters.

MIREILLE. My husband opened the wine. He never read anything, he said books were for women and for solicitors. But on Thursdays he stayed in the hall, and he listened. My son says the club is a lot of old ladies drinking wine and talking about books they haven't read.

JONAS. And it isn't true?

MIREILLE. Tonight, it isn't true. Tonight, there is a writer in the chair.

(Jonas looks at the clock, then at Mireille.)

JONAS. How far did you get?

MIREILLE. I beg your pardon?

JONAS. Nothing. A writer's question.

(The guest room door opens. Judith and Elena come out arm in arm. Judith holds a slim book with a white cover. Elena clutches her notebook to her chest.)

JUDITH. Elena helped me find my bag.

ELENA. It was under the bed.

JUDITH. She measured the bed. To be sure.

ELENA. Judith was reading under the bed. To be sure.

MIREILLE. Measured what?

JUDITH. Nothing.

ELENA. Nothing.

(Judith holds out the white book to Jonas.)

JUDITH. I wrote it. Thirty years of my gallery. I only give it to people who understand.

JONAS. Thank you.

JUDITH. You'll tell me what you think. Writer to writer.

(The doorbell. Everyone freezes. Jonas leaps up, sits down, stands up again.)

SCENE 4

(Mireille opens the door. Camille is on the landing, a dripping umbrella in one hand, a satchel in the other.)

CAMILLE. Good evening. Camille, from Éditions de l'Estran. Sorry about the time. The train stopped for forty minutes outside Saintes. A cow on the line. It was looking at us.

MIREILLE. Come in, come in! We're here. Everyone's here.

(Camille comes in, puts the umbrella in the umbrella stand, looks at the circle of armchairs.)

CAMILLE. Is she here?

(Nobody answers. Camille goes up to Béatrice.)

CAMILLE. Is it you?

BÉATRICE. Not yet.

(Camille turns to Judith.)

CAMILLE. You?

JUDITH. I could have been.

MIREILLE. It's him.

(Camille turns round. Jonas is standing in front of the tall armchair.)

CAMILLE. Him?

JONAS. Me.

CAMILLE. But the letters... The round handwriting, the green ink, the "yours truly" at the bottom of the page...

JONAS. I have round handwriting.

CAMILLE. And the PO box, at Mériadeck?

JONAS. It's mine. It's small. I open it with a key.

(A pause. Camille shakes his hand.)

CAMILLE. Sorry. You imagine things. Six months we've been imagining, at the office. We had bets on. Nobody bet on a man.

JONAS. Who won?

CAMILLE. Nobody. Our accountant bet on a retired schoolteacher. Because of the handwriting.

CAMILLE. You asked us not to come. I know. But when this lady rang this morning, I couldn't stay in La Rochelle.

JONAS. You rang them?

MIREILLE. Out of good manners.

JONAS. I wrote "not my publishers".

MIREILLE. You wrote it out of modesty.

JONAS. I wrote it in green.

CAMILLE. May I wash my hands? The train, the umbrella, the cow.

MIREILLE. Not the bathroom. There's a...

NINA. There, at the back, on the right.

JONAS. No, wait...

(Camille has already pushed the bathroom door open and disappeared behind it. The door stays ajar. Silence in the living room. Camille's voice is heard.)

CAMILLE. Oh. Sorry. Are you... the plumber?

(A pause.)

ROSE. Yes.

CAMILLE. I won't disturb you. I'm just washing my hands.

ROSE. Not that tap.

(The sound of water. Camille comes out, hands wet, and shuts the door.)

CAMILLE. There's a woman plumber in your bathroom.

MIREILLE. A woman plumber?

JUDITH. A lady plumber.

NINA. A plumber. You just say "plumber" now.

BÉATRICE. You just say anything now. That's what worries me.

MIREILLE. My plumber came? When?

JONAS. While you were in the kitchen. The bell rang. I opened the door.

MIREILLE. You let my plumber in?

JONAS. Your lady plumber.

CLAIRE. And is she any good?

CAMILLE. Very steady hands. Wouldn't let me near the left tap.

MIREILLE. I must go and see her. I have to tell her about the bucket.

(Jonas plants himself in front of the bathroom door.)

JONAS. She doesn't like people watching her work.

MIREILLE. Like you?

JONAS. Like me.

MIREILLE. How much do I owe her?

JONAS. She'll give you a job sheet.

(Camille sits on the edge of an armchair, opens the satchel and takes out a cardboard folder.)

CAMILLE. I didn't want to bring this up tonight. You asked for an ordinary evening. But since I'm here...

JONAS. What is it?

CAMILLE. The contract for the second book. It needs your signature. Marthe Lestey, at the bottom of page four.

JONAS. The second?

CAMILLE. There are four of us at the Estran. Your book has kept us alive for six months. Before it, we printed hiking guides and recipes from the île de Ré. The banker's expecting us on Monday. Without this contract, we close at Christmas.

(Camille holds out a pen. Jonas looks at the pen and doesn't take it.)

JONAS. I never sign anything without reading it.

CAMILLE. You're the one writing the book. There's nothing to read yet.

JUDITH. He's right. You don't sign without reading.

(A pause. Everyone looks at Judith.)

JUDITH. It's a principle.

SCENE 5

(Camille sits, holding the cardboard folder. Claire checks the time on her phone and stands up.)

CLAIRE. Five to nine. I'm going to look in on Rose.

JONAS. She's asleep!

CLAIRE. I'll look from the door. I won't wake anyone. Quite the opposite.

(Claire heads for Mireille's bedroom. Jonas leaps up and goes to knock on

the bathroom door.)

JONAS. Plumber! Do you need a twelve spanner?

MIREILLE. Why are you shouting?

JONAS. They're all a bit deaf. It's the pipes.

(Behind the bathroom door, a clang of metal, an inner door slamming. Claire opens Mireille's bedroom door a crack and puts her head round.)

CLAIRE. Rose? Are you asleep?

ROSE. Yes.

CLAIRE. Fine.

(Claire closes the door gently and comes back.)

CLAIRE. She's asleep. Towel over her face. Wet feet.

NINA. Why has she got... wet feet?

CLAIRE. Dizziness makes your feet sweat. It's documented.

(In the bathroom, the spanner starts tapping on a pipe again.)

(Mireille stands up in turn.)

MIREILLE. Right. I'm going to talk to this plumber. I need to show her where the bucket was, and ask her price before she makes one up.

(Jonas rushes to the bathroom again and knocks.)

JONAS. Plumber! The customer!

(Behind the doors, another slam. Mireille opens the bathroom door and looks in.)

MIREILLE. There's nobody here.

JONAS. She's under the basin.

MIREILLE. There's nobody under the basin. There's a toolbox and my bucket.

CAMILLE. She was there ten minutes ago. With her hands in the U-bend.

MIREILLE. She's gone out through my bedroom!

(Mireille crosses the living room and opens her bedroom door.)

ROSE. Mireille? Is that you? My head's still spinning.

MIREILLE. Rose, did you see a plumber go past?

ROSE. I had the towel over my eyes.

(Mireille closes the door and comes back to the middle of the room.)

NINA. Did she go out of the window?

(Everyone except Jonas turns towards the window.)

MIREILLE. On the fourth floor?

(Behind their backs, the bedroom door opens a few inches. Rose puts her head out, the towel over her shoulder, and looks at the room. Jonas sees her. No one else does. He shakes his head. Rose disappears. The door closes without a sound.)

MIREILLE. Rose is asleep, and my plumber has flown away.

JUDITH. People like that never come. And when they do, they fly away.

(From the bathroom, the sound of a spanner on a pipe, steady.)

NINA. She's... back?

MIREILLE. How?

JONAS. She'd gone down to fetch a part from her van.

MIREILLE. Through my bedroom?

JONAS. It's quicker.

MIREILLE. My bedroom doesn't lead anywhere! It opens onto my bathroom and onto this room!

JONAS. In old buildings, there are ducts. Hatches. Behind a bath there's always a way through for the pipes, and a plumber goes where the pipes go. You go in through a bathroom, you come out through a kitchen. We know routes that people don't know in their own homes.

BÉATRICE. Like writers.

JONAS. There you are. Like writers.

CAMILLE. At the office, we've had a leak in the ceiling for two years. Nobody ever comes. I'm going to ask for her card.

(Camille stands and goes towards the bathroom.)

JONAS. No!

(In the bathroom, the spanner stops. An inner door slams.)

CAMILLE. Sorry?

JONAS. She doesn't have a card. She has a number. It changes.

CLAIRE. And I'm going back to see Rose. She doesn't answer like someone who's asleep. She answers like someone who's listening.

(Claire goes towards Mireille's bedroom. Camille goes towards the bathroom. Jonas stays in the middle of the room, between the two doors, one hand stretched out towards each. Claire and Camille open the two doors at the same instant and go in. Both doors close. A pause. A thud, on the other side of the wall.)

CLAIRE. Sorry!

CAMILLE. Sorry!

(The two doors open again together. Claire comes out of the bathroom. Camille comes out of Mireille's bedroom. Claire and Camille look at each other across the room.)

CLAIRE. You were in the bathroom.

CAMILLE. You were in the bedroom.

CLAIRE. I was. Rose is asleep, with the towel over her face. And then the door at the back was open, and I ended up in the bathroom.

CAMILLE. Same here. The other way round.

CLAIRE. There's nobody in the bathroom.

CAMILLE. Nobody in the bedroom either. Just someone asleep, with a towel over their face.

(A pause. Everyone turns to Jonas.)

JONAS. The duct.

MIREILLE. What duct?

JONAS. The service duct. Between a bedroom and a bathroom there's always a gap. The architects leave it for the pipes, and the plumbers use it for everything else. You find things in there, you wouldn't believe it. Letters,

false teeth, hidden bottles. Once, a cat, who'd been living there for three years.

NINA. A cat?

JONAS. He was perfectly fine. Like the dog in the book.

CLAIRE. And a plumber fits in a duct, does she?

JONAS. A good one does.

CAMILLE. I'd like to see this duct. For the office.

JONAS. You can't see it. That's the whole point of a duct.

(In the bathroom, the spanner starts tapping on the pipe again, steady.)

ELENA. She's back.

CAMILLE. How?

JONAS. The way the pipes go.

(Judith gives Jonas a long look, then the bathroom door, then the bedroom door.)

JUDITH. A lot of things are going on behind the walls tonight.

CLAIRE. At any rate, you can't hear the drip any more.

(A pause. Everyone listens. The drip can no longer be heard.)

ELENA. "Ten past nine p.m. The drip can no longer be heard."

SCENE 6

(Jonas holds the contract without reading it. Camille waits, pen held out. Mireille signals to Elena to fill the glasses.)

MIREILLE. While he reads, Camille, tell us. What did you like best?

CAMILLE. The lighthouse.

JUDITH. And the ending?

CAMILLE. The ending is very powerful.

ELENA. And Lucien?

CAMILLE. Lucien is essential.

ELENA. There is no Lucien.

CAMILLE. For us, at the house, he's essential.

NINA. Have you read it?

(A pause. Camille puts the pen down.)

CAMILLE. Up to chapter three.

JUDITH. Three?

CAMILLE. The manuscript arrived on a Monday. By Thursday, the printer needed the back cover. I read three chapters, I wrote "a lighthouse, a storm, a young girl alone facing the sea", and I turned off the lamp.

(Camille takes a sip.)

CAMILLE. After that, everybody copied the back cover. The booksellers, the papers, the radio.

NINA. My staff pick is your back cover.

JUDITH. And my article is Nina's staff pick.

BÉATRICE. And Mireille's bookmark is another book.

MIREILLE. What bookmark?

BÉATRICE. The one about a customs man.

(Mireille empties her glass in one go.)

(Judith turns to Jonas.)

JUDITH. A publisher who doesn't read. A writer who's a man. A plumber who comes out of nowhere. I read it cover to cover. So tell us the ending, Mr Lestey. Let's see if it's the same as mine.

JONAS. You want the ending?

MIREILLE. No.

CLAIRE. Yes.

ELENA. Not yet, I'm only on page two hundred and eighty-seven.

MIREILLE. Tell us about the second part instead. We haven't talked about it yet.

CAMILLE. There's a second part?

BÉATRICE. The second part is always the best. That's where the author lets go.

(Jonas puts the contract on his knees.)

JONAS. Page three hundred and one, we leave the lighthouse. We leave the sea. It's today. Lise, Aurore's granddaughter, lives in Bordeaux. She's alone. One day, she joins a book club.

(During what follows, the bathroom door slowly opens a crack. Nobody sees it.)

JONAS. A club, on Thursday evenings, in a big flat by the river. At the home of a woman called Mathilde.

MIREILLE. Mathilde.

JONAS. Mathilde has a clock stopped at ten past four, since her husband died.

(He looks up at the clock. Everyone looks up at the clock. He goes on, more slowly.)

JONAS. Mathilde chooses the books. She chooses them very well. She never gets past page twelve.

(Judith laughs, very briefly.)

JONAS. There's a friend of Mathilde's, a friend since school, who only reads the last sentence of books and recites it to everyone, with her eyes closed.

(Judith stops laughing.)

JONAS. There's a doctor whose phone rings every Thursday at half past nine so that she can leave. She set it herself.

(Claire looks at her phone and turns it face down on her lap.)

JONAS. There's Mathilde's daughter-in-law, who keeps the minute book, and who writes up, every week, discussions that never took place.

(Elena shuts her notebook.)

JONAS. There's an old teacher who asks every book the same question, and everyone too. "Why?"

BÉATRICE. It's an excellent question.

JONAS. And there's Lise. Lise brings the canelés. Nobody talks to her. Nobody asks her what she thought. And she's the one who...

(Jonas stops. He looks at Rose's empty chair, at the plate of canelés beside it, then at the half-open bathroom door. Through the gap, Rose is looking at him. No one else sees her.)

MIREILLE. Stop.

(A long silence. Camille looks from one to the other, then writes something on the cardboard folder.)

NINA. That's six. One's missing.

JUDITH. It's us.

CLAIRE. It isn't us. That's one way of looking at it.

MIREILLE. Page twelve.

JUDITH. "With her eyes closed."

ELENA. My minute book isn't in the book. My minute book is in my bag.

CAMILLE. "A book club in Bordeaux." The back cover needs redoing.

CLAIRE. Half past nine. He even has the time.

BÉATRICE. "An old teacher who asks the same question." Is that all? Six hundred pages, and me, one question?

JONAS. There's more.

BÉATRICE. Then don't say it in front of them.

(Mireille stands and goes up to the tall armchair.)

MIREILLE. You have never been here.

JONAS. Never.

MIREILLE. You didn't know my clock.

JONAS. I saw it tonight for the first time.

MIREILLE. You didn't know a single one of us.

JONAS. Not one.

MIREILLE. Then someone told you everything.

JUDITH. Someone here.

CLAIRE. Someone who comes on Thursdays.

BÉATRICE. Someone who listens.

MIREILLE. There is a traitor in the Thursday club.

(The six look at one another. Camille looks at them. Jonas looks at the bathroom door, which closes without a sound. Blackout.)

ACT THREE

SCENE 1

(The lights come back up. The same moment. The six are standing, except Béatrice. Jonas is in the tall armchair, the contract on his knees. Camille is looking at a phone.)

CAMILLE. Sorry. The banker. He wants to know if it's signed.

JONAS. Tell him I'm reading.

CAMILLE. I've got no signal, here.

ELENA. In the kitchen, by the fridge. It's the only spot.

(Camille goes out into the kitchen, dialling a number.)

MIREILLE. Sit down. All of you.

(They sit.)

MIREILLE. Mr Lestey. Who?

JONAS. I don't reveal my sources.

JUDITH. You're not a journalist.

JONAS. I'm not much of anything, tonight.

(Mireille's bedroom door opens. Rose comes out, wiping her hands on the towel.)

ROSE. Good evening. I had a little sleep.

MIREILLE. Rose! Your dizzy spell?

ROSE. Gone.

CLAIRE. You've got something black, there, on your hand.

ROSE. Hand cream.

CLAIRE. It's black, your hand cream.

ROSE. It's a night cream.

JUDITH. Rose, sit down and be quiet. We're looking for a traitor.

ROSE. Oh.

(Rose sits down, off to the side, in her usual place.)

JUDITH. I know who it is. The minute book. Everything is in the minute book. Twenty-three years of Thursdays, who said what, who wore what, who left at what time. He only had to read the minute book.

ELENA. Nothing in the minute book is true.

MIREILLE. What do you mean, nothing is true?

(Elena opens the notebook, turns the pages, stops.)

ELENA. "Thursday 14 March. Passionate discussion of the novel's ending. Béatrice reminds us of the importance of silence in the author's work. Judith and Mireille, for once, agree. Claire stays until eleven. We part late, reluctantly."

(She shuts the notebook.)

ELENA. On the fourteenth of March, Claire left at half past nine. Judith and Mireille had a row on the landing, over an umbrella. Béatrice slept. And nobody had got past page forty.

JUDITH. The umbrella was mine.

MIREILLE. It was Paul's.

ELENA. You see.

MIREILLE. Why did you write that?

ELENA. Because in the evenings, after the club, you used to read the minute book to Paul. In his bed, at the hospital, at the end. He wanted to know how Thursday had gone. I couldn't write to him that nobody had read the book. So I wrote the Thursdays he would have loved. And afterwards, I kept going. I didn't know how you stop.

(A pause. Mireille takes the notebook out of Elena's hands and holds it

close.)

MIREILLE. I still read it. On Sundays.

ELENA. I know. The bookmark moves.

JUDITH. Right. So it isn't the minute book. It's someone with a memory.

ELENA. You knew the last sentence.

JUDITH. Everyone knows the last sentence. It's on the last page!

CLAIRE. I didn't know it.

JUDITH. You always leave before the end. You've got all the time in the world to go and tell whoever you like about our Thursdays.

CLAIRE. Tell them what? I'm never here. And you, Judith, you've got a gallery full of people who write for the papers.

JUDITH. I had. They're all dead or in Arcachon.

NINA. And you? It's your home. It's your clock.

MIREILLE. One does not betray oneself.

BÉATRICE. And yet it's what we do best, at our age.

NINA. And me?

MIREILLE. What about you?

NINA. Nobody's accusing me?

JUDITH. You've been here three months.

NINA. I still could. I've got a very good memory. I know every back cover in the shop by heart.

JUDITH. Exactly.

(Judith turns to Rose.)

JUDITH. And you, the canelé girl, who never says a word, haven't you got anything to say?

ROSE. Yes.

(Everyone looks at her.)

ROSE. The tea's cold.

(They all turn away.)

MIREILLE. Since nobody will own up, we'll do it differently. Each of us will talk to him alone. He'll tell each one what he wrote about her. And then we'll compare.

JONAS. I didn't write anything about anybody.

MIREILLE. You wrote it in green. Everyone into the guest room. We go in one at a time. Like at the doctor's.

CLAIRE. At the doctor's, it's never one at a time.

(They stand and go out into the guest room, Béatrice last. Rose stops on the threshold, looks at Jonas, then goes in too. The door closes. Jonas is alone. He opens the contract, shuts it. He looks at the bathroom door.)

SCENE 2

(The guest room door opens. Judith comes out, closes it behind her, and comes to sit opposite Jonas.)

JUDITH. I'll go first. I'm old enough.

JONAS. Béatrice is old enough.

JUDITH. Béatrice has time. Well? What did you write about me? Apart from the eyes closed.

JONAS. In the book, Mathilde's friend wrote a book, a long time ago. About her gallery. She gave it to everybody. Nobody read it to the end. She knows: she's seen, in people's homes, years later, the pages that never opened. Since then she only reads endings. So as not to do to others what was done to her.

(A pause. Judith looks at the white book lying on the coffee table.)

JUDITH. That's not true.

JONAS. It's the book.

JUDITH. Béatrice fell asleep on page ten. She told me so herself, as a compliment. "Your book is so restful."

(She picks up the white book, looks at it, puts it back down in front of Jonas.)

JUDITH. Will you read it anyway?

JONAS. Cover to cover. I read everything cover to cover. Instructions, manuals, contracts. It's the job.

JUDITH. What job?

JONAS. Being a writer.

(Judith stands, goes towards the guest room, turns back.)

JUDITH. Tell whoever told you that I don't hold it against her. But tell her too that I don't recite with my eyes closed. I lower them.

(She goes out into the guest room. At once, the kitchen door opens. Camille puts a head round it.)

CAMILLE. Nine twenty-six. He's asking if you've read as far as page four.

JONAS. Page two.

CAMILLE. He says page two doesn't matter.

JONAS. Tell him that's where people usually get caught.

(Camille comes into the room, shuts the kitchen door, speaking low.)

CAMILLE. Can I tell you something, while he's holding? Your letters. I read them on the train, in the mornings. You write three lines, "yours truly", and it feels true, as if it really were truly mine. At the office, we pass them round. When you wrote that we mustn't come, I cried in the office kitchen, in front of the kettle.

JONAS. Why?

CAMILLE. I wanted to see the hand that wrote that.

(Jonas looks at his hands. Camille looks at them too.)

CAMILLE. They're bigger than I thought.

JONAS. They've done a lot of work.

(Camille's phone buzzes. Camille goes back into the kitchen. The guest room door opens. Mireille comes out, Claire on her heels.)

CLAIRE. It's not your turn.

MIREILLE. It's my home. Page twelve, Mr Lestey. In front of everyone.

JONAS. In the book, Mathilde doesn't read the books. She reads ahead, to the next Thursday.

MIREILLE. That's kind.

JONAS. It's the book that's kind.

CLAIRE. Mireille. I'm on a precise schedule.

(Mireille goes back into the guest room. Claire sits down opposite Jonas, her phone in her hand.)

CLAIRE. I've got three minutes left. Before the hospital calls.

(She puts the phone on the coffee table, screen down against the wood.)

CLAIRE. It's true. I set it myself. Half past nine, every Thursday, for four years. An emergency ringtone, really ugly. I say "the hospital", I grab my bag, I leave before anyone asks me what I thought of the book.

JONAS. Then why do you come?

CLAIRE. For the two hours before. A room where nobody needs me. Nobody's going under, nobody's waking up, nobody's asking me for the dose. They talk. I listen to the noise.

(Behind Claire, the guest room door opens a crack. Three heads appear, one above the other: Judith, Nina, Elena. Jonas sees them. Claire doesn't.)

JONAS. And the books?

CLAIRE. I spend my nights putting people to sleep. When I open a novel, I'm the one who goes under. Page three.

(Claire's phone rings. A shrill ringtone. She lets it ring.)

JUDITH. Half past nine!

(Claire turns round. The heads vanish. The door slams. Claire switches the phone off.)

CLAIRE. Tonight, I'm staying.

(She goes to the guest room and flings the door open. Judith, Nina and Elena tumble into the living room, one on top of the other.)

CLAIRE. You were listening.

JUDITH. We were checking the door.

ELENA. It creaks. I've made a note.

NINA. And me? Am I in the book?

JONAS. You're not in it.

NINA. Not at all?

JONAS. It was written before you came.

NINA. I've sold three hundred copies of a book I'm not in.

(Nina gets up and looks at Jonas for a long moment.)

NINA. When you came in, you said: "the most beautiful book I've ever opened." Authors, at the shop... they never say that about their own. They say "it has its flaws". And they wait for you to say no.

JUDITH. What are you talking about?

NINA. Nothing. I'm on probation.

(Mireille appears at the guest room door.)

MIREILLE. Everybody inside. Béatrice is waiting.

(Claire, Judith, Nina and Elena go back into the guest room. Béatrice comes out. She makes her way forward, feeling the chair backs with the tip of her stick, and sits down.)

BÉATRICE. The old teacher who says "why". Is that all I get, in your book? One word?

JONAS. No.

BÉATRICE. Then tell me.

JONAS. In the book, somebody reads to her aloud. On Tuesdays. Because she can't see the letters any more. She doesn't tell anyone. And when the book is bad, she pretends to fall asleep, so that the one reading can stop without feeling ashamed.

(A long pause.)

BÉATRICE. On Tuesdays.

JONAS. On Tuesdays.

BÉATRICE. There's only one person in the world who knows that.

JONAS. I don't reveal my...

BÉATRICE. You don't need to.

(She stands up, slowly, on her stick.)

BÉATRICE. She wrote that I was pretending?

JONAS. It's written.

BÉATRICE. Then she knew. From the very first Tuesday, she knew I wasn't asleep.

JONAS. You said "she".

BÉATRICE. I'm eighty-four, young man. I can't see the letters any more, but I can see a plumber perfectly well.

JONAS. Are you going to tell them?

BÉATRICE. It isn't for me to tell. All I ever say is "why".

(Béatrice goes towards the guest room. The door opens before she reaches it. Rose comes out, the towel in her hand. They pass each other on the threshold.)

BÉATRICE. Rose.

ROSE. Béatrice.

BÉATRICE. Will you come on Tuesday?

ROSE. Like every Tuesday.

BÉATRICE. Not like every Tuesday. You'll start at page one.

(Béatrice goes back into the guest room. Rose crosses the living room towards Mireille's bedroom.)

JONAS. Rose. The job sheet.

ROSE. I'm on it.

(The kitchen door opens. Camille comes in, phone in hand. Rose is in the middle of the room, back turned. Rose stops dead.)

CAMILLE. Oh! The plumber!

(Rose doesn't turn round. Jonas grabs the first thing within reach on the coffee table, Judith's white book, and puts it in her hand.)

ROSE. I was looking for my twelve spanner.

CAMILLE. That's a book.

ROSE. Tightens just as well.

(Rose goes into Mireille's bedroom without turning round and shuts the door.)

CAMILLE. She goes through the bedroom now?

JONAS. It's quicker.

CAMILLE. Twenty-two minutes to ten. He wants a photo of the signature before ten. Otherwise, on Monday, he won't even see us.

(The guest room door opens. They come back into the living room one behind the other. Rose isn't with them.)

SCENE 3

(They sit down again in a circle. Camille stays standing, phone at the ready. Jonas has the contract open at page four on his knees.)

MIREILLE. Well?

JONAS. Well what?

MIREILLE. You've seen us one at a time. Who?

CAMILLE. Sorry. The signature first. It's twenty to ten. After that, you can look for whoever you like.

JUDITH. Sign. It's historic.

MIREILLE. Sign. Then you tell us who.

ELENA. I'm noting the time.

CLAIRE. Nine forty-one. My phone's off, I'm looking at the kitchen clock.

(Camille holds out the pen. Jonas takes it. He sets the nib on the page. Everyone leans in. He draws one letter. He stops. He puts the pen down.)

JONAS. I can't.

CAMILLE. You can't what?

JONAS. Sign. It's not my name.

CAMILLE. It's a pen name. It's nobody's name.

JONAS. Exactly. It isn't mine.

(He stands up.)

JONAS. I'm the plumber.

(Total silence.)

MIREILLE. The plumber?

JONAS. Between six and ten. You called this morning. I had a job before, on the other side of the river. I got here at eight.

MIREILLE. The author's time.

JONAS. I didn't know I was on anyone's time.

JUDITH. I gave my book to the plumber.

JONAS. I'll read it anyway.

JUDITH. "People like that don't read a thing." I said that.

JONAS. At two minutes past eight. I still had the case in my hand.

JUDITH. And you stayed.

JONAS. I wanted to know what it's like, being listened to in an armchair. In people's homes, usually, they talk to me when I'm on all fours under the sink. They talk to my back.

JUDITH. And what's it like?

JONAS. Frightening. You want to say true things, to live up to the armchair.

CLAIRE. That explains the bucket.

BÉATRICE. I always said so.

NINA. I knew. Since the guest room.

JUDITH. And you didn't say anything?

NINA. I'm on probation.

ELENA. "Nine forty-two p.m. The plumber."

CAMILLE. I shook your hand. I told you about the kettle.

JONAS. I won't tell the accountant.

CAMILLE. But you've read it. Cover to cover. Better than I have.

JONAS. Twice. In the van, between two leaks. I bought it because there was a lighthouse on the cover, and I love lighthouses. A lighthouse is plumbing. Water everywhere, and the light has to stay dry.

CAMILLE. And the plumber?

JONAS. There is no lady plumber.

CAMILLE. I saw her! She wouldn't let me near the left tap!

MIREILLE. Then who fixed my bathroom?

JUDITH. And who wrote this book?

(Everyone talks at once. Mireille claps her hands.)

MIREILLE. She didn't come. She promised, and she didn't come.

JONAS. She came.

MIREILLE. When?

JONAS. She was here before me.

(The bathroom door opens. Rose comes out, sleeves rolled up, the toolbox in her hand, a green pen behind her ear, a sheet from a pad in her other hand, Judith's white book under her arm.)

ROSE. It's fixed. The seal on the basin, and the U-bend, while I was at it. Mireille, you need to sign the job sheet. Otherwise he doesn't get paid.

CAMILLE. The plumber!

MIREILLE. Rose?

JUDITH. Rose is a plumber?

ROSE. Tonight, yes.

(Camille takes the sheet out of Rose's hand. Reads.)

CAMILLE. "Replaced seal on basin. Cleaned U-bend. Ten past nine p.m. Yours truly."

(Camille looks up.)

CAMILLE. "Yours truly."

(Elena opens her notebook at tonight's page and puts it down next to the job sheet.)

ELENA. She signed the book at quarter past seven. With the same pen.

(Camille opens the satchel, takes out a bundle of letters held together with an elastic band, pulls one out and lays it beside the job sheet. Compares.)

CAMILLE. The same handwriting. The same “yours truly”. The same ink. Six months I’ve been getting these letters. I’ve kept every single one.

(A pause. Camille looks at Rose.)

CAMILLE. It’s you.

(Nobody moves. Rose puts the toolbox down on the rug, next to the tall armchair.)

ROSE. Good evening. My name is Rose. Marthe is for the books.

SCENE 4

(A long silence. Rose stays standing in the middle of the circle.)

JUDITH. You were here.

ROSE. Every Thursday. For six years.

CLAIRE. Half past nine. How did you know?

ROSE. Fifteen years of nights in your hospital, Claire. You’ve never been on call on a Thursday.

CLAIRE. You never told anyone.

ROSE. Who would I tell? I didn’t talk.

JUDITH. And my book? You wrote that nobody had read it.

(Rose holds out the white book to her.)

ROSE. I read it. All of it. Aloud, to Béatrice. She fell asleep on page ten, and I carried on by myself to the end. There’s a page about a painting of a boat that nobody ever wanted to buy, and that you kept. Page ninety. It’s the most beautiful one.

JUDITH. Ninety.

(Judith sits down, the white book held against her.)

NINA. And I’m not in it.

ROSE. You came too late for the first one. You’ll be in the next.

NINA. Can I write the staff pick?

ROSE. If you read it.

NINA. Cover to cover.

(A pause. Nina turns to Mireille.)

NINA. Someone important spoke to me.

MIREILLE. You're in.

JUDITH. She's been speaking to you for three months, Nina. She's the one who showed you where to put the coats.

NINA. Yes. But tonight, I heard her.

(Béatrice raps the floor with her stick. Everyone turns to her.)

BÉATRICE. The senior member asks the first question.

MIREILLE. Béatrice, this isn't the moment.

BÉATRICE. Since 1971, this is the first time I've had the right author in front of me. I'm not letting it go.

(She looks at Rose.)

BÉATRICE. Why?

(A pause.)

ROSE. Because I worked nights. Thirty years awake while everyone else was asleep. Around four in the morning, between two rounds, there's an hour when nothing happens, when nobody rings. An hour of my own. I wrote in that hour. The lighthouse first, because my father used to talk to me about it, and he died without ever going up it. And then one Thursday, Béatrice brought me here. I brought canelés. I was told to put them in the kitchen. Nobody asked me what I'd thought of the book, and I hadn't read it either, so that was fair. I sat down at the side, and I watched. And one night, at four o'clock, I left Aurore at the top of her steps. Page three hundred and one. I came down off the island, and I came here.

MIREILLE. And tonight?

ROSE. Tonight, I was coming to tell you. I'd slipped the letter into your letterbox on my way back up to my flat. And then he rang the bell, and you were all so happy to have a writer in the chair. I didn't dare take him away from you.

JUDITH. And page three hundred? You'd stopped.

ROSE. I stopped at page three hundred because after that, it's you.

(Mireille takes a copy from the pile and opens it.)

MIREILLE. I'm going to read page thirteen.

ROSE. Read three hundred and one first. You'll get through it faster, you know the people.

(Camille steps forward, contract in hand.)

CAMILLE. Sorry. This isn't the moment. It's ten to ten. The banker.

ROSE. I'll sign. On one condition. You read Jonas's.

JONAS. Mine?

ROSE. It's been sticking out of your bag since eight o'clock. You can see the clothes pegs.

(Jonas opens his canvas bag and takes out a sheaf of pages held together with two clothes pegs.)

CAMILLE. What's it about?

JONAS. People's bathrooms.

CAMILLE. We published recipes from the Île de Ré. Nothing frightens us any more.

ROSE. Cover to cover.

CAMILLE. Cover to cover. This time, I've got no back cover due on Thursday.

(Rose takes the green pen from behind her ear and signs the contract on the coffee table. Camille photographs the page.)

CAMILLE. Nine fifty-one. The Estran won't close at Christmas.

(Mireille takes the job sheet and the green pen and signs at the bottom. She hands the sheet to Jonas.)

MIREILLE. Your job sheet. Your boss will be pleased.

JONAS. My boss won't believe me.

MIREILLE. Tell him it was an ordinary evening.

(Mireille turns to Elena.)

MIREILLE. And you can tell Thomas that the living room is forty square metres. And that on Thursdays, it's full.

ELENA. You knew?

MIREILLE. Your tape measure has been sticking out of your notebook since September. I didn't say a thing. I wanted to see what you'd write.

(Jonas picks up his case and his bag and goes to the front door. He turns round.)

JONAS. Thank you for the canelés.

MIREILLE. Next Thursday, will you come? We'll read yours.

JONAS. Between six and ten.

ROSE. Stay for tea. It's cold, but I'll make some more.

(Rose takes the teapot and goes out into the kitchen. Jonas puts his case down by the door and stays. A pause. The club looks at the kitchen door.)

CLAIRE. Six years. Two floors down.

BÉATRICE. I knew she was listening. That's already a lot, with us.

(Rose comes back with the steaming teapot. She goes round the circle and pours tea into each cup, one by one. The six watch her. Jonas watches her. Camille watches her. Nobody speaks.)

JUDITH. And she poured the tea, as she did every Thursday...

(She stops.)

BÉATRICE. Go on.

JUDITH. No. The ending's changed.

(Rose puts down the teapot and sits in the tall armchair. Blackout.)



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