

High Water

Chamber piece · 3-character play · 1 woman, 1 man, 1 either · 75 min · Advanced · Ages 12+

One night in March, the Vionne is rising faster than forecast. In the council chamber at Pontvieux, the mayor has to decide before dawn whether to open the spillway on the south bank: to flood the Aulnes plain to save the town. Her mother refuses to leave the family house, in the middle of the plain. Her brother, the levee engineer, presses her to open it without being willing to say why, and Camille, on duty tonight, has a father on the other side of the water.

The council chamber of the town hall in Pontvieux, a small town on the river Vionne, on the night of the 25th to the 26th of March, the present day.

Casting

MARTHE (Female role, Senior) 61, mayor of Pontvieux for twenty-five years; her mother lives on the south bank, in the house where she grew up.

SIMON (Male role, Adult) 52, her brother, engineer in charge of the levee for twenty-one years.

CAMILLE (No gender marker, Young adult) 24, on duty at the town hall tonight; grew up on the Aulnes plain, where Camille's father keeps cows.

ACT ONE: ELEVEN P.M.

SCENE 1

(The council chamber of a small town hall. A long table, chairs, a flag. On a separate table, a radio, a landline, a large open register. On the wall, a map of the district, cut in two by a river. Rain on the windows.)

(Camille is writing in the register. Marthe stands in front of the map, her mobile to her ear. Very far off, a phone ringing and ringing.)

CAMILLE. Eleven p.m. Bridge gauge: five metres fifty-eight.

(Marthe lowers the phone. The ringing stops.)

MARTHE. She's not picking up.

CAMILLE. Maybe she's asleep.

MARTHE. She's not asleep. She hasn't slept for years. She listens to the radio in the kitchen till three in the morning. She heard it ring. She looked at the phone, she saw my name, and she put another log in the stove.

(She puts the mobile down on the table.)

MARTHE. Moulins?

CAMILLE. Moulins-la-Roche gave six metres twelve at ten forty. They say it's slowing down.

MARTHE. They've been saying that since six this evening.

CAMILLE. They said it more quietly this time.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. The prefecture?

CAMILLE. Called back at ten fifty. I wrote it down. The prefect's chief of staff. He said, I'm reading it out: "The spillway regulations are clear, the decision lies with the mayor. The prefect will not take command of operations. The prefecture remains available to her."

MARTHE. He could take command. He has chosen not to.

CAMILLE. That's what he said.

MARTHE. It means he's sitting in his kitchen as well, with his phone face down on the table, and he doesn't want to see his name at the bottom of a

page.

CAMILLE. Shall I write that down too?

MARTHE. No.

(Camille's pen doesn't move.)

MARTHE. You can write "Prefecture remains available." It's true. It does remain.

(Camille writes. The radio crackles; a voice, numbers you can't make out.)

CAMILLE. The spillway team want to know if they should stay put.

MARTHE. They stay.

CAMILLE. They want to know till when.

MARTHE. Till I call them.

CAMILLE. Spillway, this is town hall. Stay in position. The mayor will call you back. Out.

(The radio crackles.)

CAMILLE. They say it's cold.

MARTHE. They've got a van, a flask and a heater. There are people out there who've only got their roof.

CAMILLE. I won't pass that on.

MARTHE. No. Don't pass that on.

(The landline rings. Camille picks up.)

CAMILLE. Pontvieux town hall, duty line. Yes. Yes, sir. Rue du Moulin, in Les Prés-Neufs. Yes, the evacuation order covers the whole street.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. I understand. No, I can't tell you whether the water will come up as far as your house. I can tell you the fire brigade are going round with the loudhailer and there are beds in the sports hall.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Yes, the levee is rated for seven metres forty. Yes, that's what the mayor said.

(Camille covers the mouthpiece.)

CAMILLE. He says you said so yourself, on television, and he doesn't see why he should go and sleep in the sports hall with his wife and the dog if the levee's going to hold.

MARTHE. Put him on.

(Camille hands her the receiver.)

MARTHE. Mr Ferrand? Marthe Aubry. Yes. Yes, I said it. I'd say it again. Take the dog, take your wife, take the car, and go to the sports hall. No, it isn't a suggestion. Thank you. Good night.

(She hangs up.)

CAMILLE. Will he go?

MARTHE. He'll go to keep me happy, and he'll hold it against me for ten years. That's how you know people are all right.

(Marthe goes back to the map. She puts a finger on the north bank, then slides it down to the river.)

MARTHE. Les Prés-Neufs?

CAMILLE. The fire brigade say two hundred and ten houses empty out of four hundred. The rest won't leave or don't answer. They're going back round the streets with the loudhailer every hour.

MARTHE. Les Tilleuls?

CAMILLE. They've got out the ones who can walk. There are forty-one left. The hospital ambulances set off at ten, they're doing runs. Four per run.

MARTHE. Ten runs.

CAMILLE. Eleven. There's one who can't sit up.

(A pause. Camille glances at the mobile on the table, turns it face down.)

MARTHE. You're allowed to look at your phone.

CAMILLE. I wasn't looking at it.

MARTHE. You've been looking at it since ten. Every four minutes. I count too.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. My father went out at ten. He went over to the Aulnes.

MARTHE. To the Aulnes. Whose place?

CAMILLE. Your mother's.

(Marthe doesn't answer.)

CAMILLE. He shut the cows in the high barn at six, he came home, he ate standing up, and he said: "Old Odette's still all alone up on her knoll, I'm going to fetch her, I'll drag her back if I have to." He took the tractor. At twenty past ten, he sent me a text. One word: "Here." Since then, nothing.

MARTHE. Nobody drags my mother anywhere.

CAMILLE. He's got a tractor.

MARTHE. I was there at four this afternoon, with the council car and two firemen. She was peeling potatoes. She asked if I was staying for dinner. I told her the Vionne was going to come over the road. She said: "The Vionne has been coming over the road since the day I was born, and it's never come higher than the second step." She laid two more places, for the firemen.

CAMILLE. And you left.

MARTHE. I had a town to evacuate.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. The Aulnes road has been cut since half past ten. The gendarmes have put the barrier across at the bridge crossroads.

MARTHE. I know.

CAMILLE. So there are two of them, out there.

MARTHE. There are two of them on the knoll. On the knoll, the water has never got past the second step. Not in fifty-five, not in eighty-two.

CAMILLE. Nobody had opened the spillway in eighty-two.

MARTHE. The spillway didn't exist in eighty-two.

(A pause. The rain gets heavier.)

CAMILLE. If we open it, how long does the water take to reach the knoll?

MARTHE. I don't know.

CAMILLE. You don't know?

MARTHE. I'm not the one who knows. Simon's the one who knows. He did the calculations, he drew the plans, he knows every ditch on that plain better than your father knows his cows.

CAMILLE. Where is he?

MARTHE. On the levee. Since five this evening. He's not answering either.

(She picks up her mobile again, dials a number, listens. Nothing can be heard.)

MARTHE. Voicemail. He says you don't talk to a machine.

CAMILLE. Do you want me to call him on the radio?

MARTHE. He didn't take a radio. He never takes a radio. He says it stops him listening to the water.

(The radio crackles again. Camille listens, writes.)

CAMILLE. Ten past eleven. Bridge gauge: five metres sixty-one.

MARTHE. Three centimetres in ten minutes.

CAMILLE. Yes.

MARTHE. At six this evening, it was two.

CAMILLE. Yes.

MARTHE. Don't say yes. Tell me I'm wrong.

CAMILLE. You're not wrong.

(A door, downstairs, then heavy footsteps on the stairs.)

SCENE 2

(Simon comes in. Oilskin open, mud up to the thighs, a head torch, switched off, round his neck. He stays by the door. Water runs off him onto the parquet.)

SIMON. We have to open.

MARTHE. Good evening, Simon.

SIMON. We have to open before three.

MARTHE. Sit down.

SIMON. I'm getting mud everywhere.

MARTHE. That parquet was laid in 1890, it's seen worse than you. Sit down.

(He doesn't sit. Camille hands him the flask. He drinks straight from it, for a long time.)

SIMON. Thanks. Camille. You're on nights?

CAMILLE. Till eight.

SIMON. Nobody's on nights till eight. You're on nights till the night stops.

MARTHE. The Saules?

SIMON. At the Saules, on the field side, there are boils. In the grass, at the foot of the levee, ten, fifteen metres out. The water comes up out of the ground like a pan on the boil. It's cloudy. It's carrying sand.

CAMILLE. What does that mean, sand?

SIMON. It means the water isn't going through the levee. It's going under it. It's found a way. And every grain of sand it carries off, that's the way getting wider. A clear boil, you keep an eye on it. A boil carrying sand, you count it. At six, I had three. At ten, nine. When I left, I'd stopped counting.

MARTHE. Have you put sandbags down?

SIMON. We've made rings of sandbags round each one, so the water rises inside and pushes back against itself. The lads from the roads department are out there, filling bags by the light of the trucks. It slows it down. It doesn't mend anything.

MARTHE. In ninety-four, there were boils at the Saules.

SIMON. Yes.

MARTHE. In 2016 as well. You had me come out in wellies, at midnight, to look at them. The levee held.

SIMON. In 2016, we had five metres eighty at the bridge. This morning, we'll have seven metres ten.

MARTHE. The levee is rated for seven metres forty. It's in writing. I've read it a hundred times, I said it on regional television in 2018, I said it to the people in Les Prés-Neufs when they were afraid to buy. Seven metres

forty. That's thirty centimetres to spare.

SIMON. Not at the Saules.

MARTHE. The Saules are part of the levee.

SIMON. Not at the Saules, Marthe.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. How much?

SIMON. Six eighty. Six ninety. I don't know. Nobody knows, past a certain number of boils. At tonight's rate, we'll be there around six, before it's light. It could hold till morning and go at five to seven. It could go in an hour.

(Marthe goes to the map.)

MARTHE. If we open at three?

SIMON. We take sixty, seventy centimetres off at the bridge at the peak. We stay under six fifty. The Saules hold.

MARTHE. And the plain?

SIMON. The plain takes what we give it. That's what we drew it for.

CAMILLE. How long, for the knoll?

(Simon looks at Camille.)

SIMON. An hour and a half for the bottom of the Aulnes. Two hours for the foot of the knoll. After that, it rises fast, because the plain is a basin: nearly a metre an hour, until it's full.

CAMILLE. Full means how much, at the house?

SIMON. Two metres ten at the foot of the kitchen wall.

MARTHE. The second step.

SIMON. The kitchen ceiling.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. The attic?

SIMON. The attic stays dry. The floor's at two metres sixty. I measured it. Do you think I didn't measure it?

MARTHE. She doesn't go up the stairs any more. Not since her hip. She sleeps in the dining room, on the sofa. You know that, you brought the bed down yourself.

SIMON. I know.

MARTHE. So what you're asking me is to send two metres of water into a room where an eighty-six-year-old woman who can't climb the stairs any more is asleep.

SIMON. I'm asking you to open the spillway before the levee opens by itself. When the levee opens by itself, it isn't two metres in two hours. It's a wall. And behind the Saules, there's no plain. There's Les Prés-Neufs. There's the school. There's Les Tilleuls.

CAMILLE. There are forty-one residents left at Les Tilleuls.

SIMON. You see.

CAMILLE. And there's my father, at the Aulnes.

(Simon turns to Camille.)

SIMON. Yann?

CAMILLE. He went to fetch your mother at ten. He hasn't come back.

SIMON. He's in the house?

CAMILLE. He wrote "Here." After that, the road was cut.

(Simon sits down at last, at the end of the table.)

SIMON. He's always done that. When we were little, he was the one who came out on the ice to get us, when we went too far out on the pond.

MARTHE. Simon.

SIMON. He carried me on his back. He was twelve, and he carried me on his back all the way home.

MARTHE. Simon. The regulations.

SIMON. What about the regulations?

MARTHE. The spillway regulations. Article four. "Opening shall be ordered by the mayor of Pontvieux, following the written opinion of the levee engineer." Written opinion. You were the one who insisted on that sentence. You said the mayor knew nothing about it and nobody was going to drown eleven farms on the strength of a phone call.

SIMON. I did say that.

MARTHE. Then write it. You take a sheet of paper, you write: "The levee will not hold at the Saules above six metres eighty," you date it, you sign it, and I call the spillway van.

(Camille tears a sheet off the pad and puts it in front of Simon with a pen. Simon looks at the sheet.)

SIMON. I'm telling you. I'm here, I'm telling you.

MARTHE. You're telling me. The regulations don't ask you to tell me. They ask you to write it.

SIMON. If I write that, they'll ask me why.

MARTHE. Who will?

SIMON. Everyone. Tomorrow. The people from the Aulnes. The insurers. The prefecture, which remains available to you. They'll ask me why a levee rated for seven metres forty won't hold at six eighty. And I'll have to answer.

MARTHE. And why won't it hold?

(Simon doesn't answer. He puts the pen down beside the sheet, perfectly straight.)

MARTHE. Simon. Why won't it hold?

(The landline rings. No one moves. It rings again. Camille picks up.)

CAMILLE. Pontvieux town hall, duty line. Yes. Yes, she's here. Hold on.

(Camille holds the receiver out to Marthe.)

CAMILLE. It's your mother.

(Blackout.)

ACT TWO: MIDNIGHT

SCENE 1

(The same room. Marthe at the landline, standing, the cord pulled tight. Simon sitting at the end of the table, the blank sheet in front of him. Camille at the register. Rain.)

MARTHE. Mum. Yes, it's me. Yes, I'm at the town hall.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. No, I'm not sleeping here. I'm not sleeping anywhere, tonight.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Is Yann there? Put him on.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. He's asleep. In Dad's armchair. All right. Let him sleep. Listen to me. No, you listen to me, for once. The Vionne is at five metres seventy-five at the bridge.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I know you've got the radio on. I know you can hear it better than I can.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Yes. The spillway. I haven't decided anything. Mum. I haven't decided anything.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I never said that to you. I said that as long as I was mayor...

(A pause. She closes her eyes.)

MARTHE. Yes. I said it. In the kitchen, on All Saints' Day, twenty years ago. I remember.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. You didn't sign, I know. You're the only one. Everyone knows, you told the whole market for six years. But that doesn't protect you, Mum. A missing signature doesn't protect a house. Water doesn't read agreements.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. What did you say? Say that again.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. If you go up to the attic... I know you can't. Yann can carry you. He carried Simon on his back all the way home, he can carry you up a staircase.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. He's here, yes. He's covered in mud. He won't sit on the council chairs.

(Simon looks up.)

MARTHE. I'll tell him.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Mum. The photos. Dad's albums, in the sideboard, they ought to go upstairs.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. You've taken them up. When?

(A pause.)

MARTHE. In September. You took them up to the attic in September.

(A long pause.)

MARTHE. Why in September?

(A pause. Marthe listens for a long time. She says nothing.)

MARTHE. All right. Put Yann on when he wakes up. Yes. Yes. You too.

(She hangs up. She keeps her hand on the receiver.)

SIMON. What are you supposed to tell me?

MARTHE. To put on a dry shirt. There are some of yours in the wardrobe in your room, she's ironed them.

SIMON. What else did she say?

MARTHE. That Yann's asleep in Dad's armchair. That he had two bowls of soup. That he tried to put her in the tractor and she asked him if he took her for a bale of hay.

CAMILLE. He's asleep.

MARTHE. He's asleep, Camille. He's snoring. She held the phone up so I could hear.

(Camille closes the register, opens it again, picks up the pen.)

SIMON. The albums?

MARTHE. In the attic since September. With Dad's portrait, the sewing box, the letters. Everything that can't be replaced. She asked the Mercier boy to carry them up.

SIMON. Why in September?

MARTHE. I asked her.

SIMON. And?

MARTHE. She said: "Because the day Simon came to measure the attic with his tape, I wasn't deaf yet." She said: "You're my children, I can read your faces." She said: "Do what you have to do, Marthe. You always have."

(A pause. Rain.)

SIMON. I came to measure in July. I told her it was for the insurance.

MARTHE. She pretended to believe you for two months. And in September, she took the albums up.

SCENE 2

(Marthe lets go of the receiver. She turns to Camille.)

MARTHE. Camille. Second floor, the planning office, the grey cabinet at the back. The key's under the ficus pot. Bring me down the levee file. "Acceptance of works, 2006." Blue binders. There are three of them. Bring all three.

CAMILLE. Now?

MARTHE. Now. If I open, the prefecture will want the documents at eight. If I don't open, they'll want them too, later, with other people round the table.

SIMON. There's no point.

MARTHE. You don't want to write. I want to read.

SIMON. There's nothing in there I can't tell you myself.

MARTHE. Then tell me before Camille gets back.

(Camille picks up a handheld radio from the table, hesitates, looks at Simon, then at Marthe.)

CAMILLE. If Moulins calls, I'll hear it on this.

MARTHE. Go.

(Camille goes out. Footsteps going up the stairs. A pause.)

MARTHE. You've got five minutes. That cabinet is hard to open.

SIMON. I know. I was the last one to lock it.

MARTHE. The Saules.

SIMON. The Saules were never done.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. We did them in 2007.

SIMON. We voted them in 2007. In March. Here, at this table. You at the end, me standing against the wall, because I wasn't elected, I was the engineer, nobody gave me a chair. Three hundred metres of clay core. Four hundred thousand euros. Unanimous. There was applause. Gérard had brought some crémant.

MARTHE. I remember the crémant.

SIMON. And in October, you put through a budget amendment.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. The school.

SIMON. The school in Les Prés-Neufs. There were a hundred and twenty children arriving the following September and not one classroom to put them in. You said: we'll put the Saules back a year. The Saules have held for a hundred years, they'll hold for one more. That's more or less how you put it.

MARTHE. And the year after?

SIMON. The year after, the government cut the grants. The year after that, there was the sports hall. Then the sewage works, then the Rue du Marché. After that, I stopped asking.

MARTHE. You stopped asking.

SIMON. You stopped asking me the question. It isn't the same thing, but it comes to the same. Every year, I sent you the levee inspection report. Every year, at the bottom of page three, I wrote: "Saules section: works scheduled in 2006 not carried out, to be monitored." Every year, you signed the report.

MARTHE. I read your reports.

SIMON. You signed page one. Nineteen years. Nineteen times page one. Page three, I wrote nineteen times for nobody.

(Marthe goes to the window.)

MARTHE. And the acceptance report? The 2006 acceptance report rates the levee for seven metres forty. I've had it in front of me for twenty years, it's framed in the corridor.

SIMON. The photo of the signing is framed in the corridor. Not the report.

MARTHE. Simon.

SIMON. The twenty-ninth of December 2006. Here. It was snowing. Their site foreman had written a reservation by hand, at the bottom of the last page: "Saules section, core not built." With that reservation, no grant before the thirty-first. And do you know what you were looking at, right then? Not the reservation. The window. Les Prés-Neufs under the snow. Your four hundred houses that were still only a drawing on a restaurant tablecloth.

MARTHE. I've never drawn on a tablecloth.

SIMON. You have. At the Cheval Blanc, in 2004. I kept it.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I said: we lift the reservation, and we do the Saules next summer.

SIMON. You said: "Simon, it's three hundred metres. We're not going to leave four hundred families out in the cold for three hundred metres." You said: "You have my word." And I picked up the pen, I crossed out the reservation, I wrote "reservation lifted" and I put my initials. You put yours next to them. The site foreman watched us. He didn't say a thing. He just put his woolly hat back on.

MARTHE. You were thirty-two.

SIMON. I was thirty-two, I had a degree, and I knew exactly what I was doing. Don't hand me my age as an excuse. I never took it.

(A pause. Marthe comes back to the table.)

MARTHE. Do you remember Pontvieux in 2001? When I was elected? The Jules-Ferry school had two classes and they were going to close one. The bakery on the square had been shut since the winter. There was a "for sale" sign on one house in three on the high street. The young ones left at eighteen and only came back for funerals. I made a list, the first week, in

this office: the people who were going to die in the next ten years. It ran to two pages. A town, Simon, isn't houses. It's people arriving faster than they leave. Les Prés-Neufs was the only flat, dry land we had. Dry, provided there was a levee. So I built the levee. I brought in four hundred families. I got the bakery open again, I had the school built, and today there are three nursery classes in Pontvieux and a waiting list at the crèche. I don't regret a single house. Not one.

SIMON. I didn't ask you to regret the houses.

MARTHE. Then what are you asking me?

SIMON. Nothing. I'm telling you why the levee is giving way. You asked me twice.

(A pause.)

SIMON. I bought in Les Prés-Neufs in 2008. Rue des Saules. Do you remember why?

MARTHE. So people would see the engineer slept behind his own levee.

SIMON. That's what you told me to tell the paper. I did it so I'd sleep behind the Saules. If it was ever going to go, I wanted to be the first one wet.

MARTHE. Is your house empty?

SIMON. Since six. I left the cat with the neighbour, and she's gone, cat and all. I don't know where she is, or the cat.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Write the opinion.

SIMON. Marthe...

MARTHE. Write the number. "Risk of breach at the Saules above six metres eighty." The date, the time, your signature. The why, we'll explain tomorrow, to whoever asks. Tonight, all I need is the number.

SIMON. Tomorrow, they won't need to ask us. All they'll have to do is open the grey cabinet.

MARTHE. Write the number, Simon.

SIMON. And you? If I write it, will you open?

(Marthe doesn't answer.)

SIMON. You see. It isn't my signature you're missing.

(Blackout.)

SCENE 3

(The lights come back up. Later. Simon is asleep, sitting at the end of the table, his head on his arms. Marthe, standing at the register, is writing. Camille comes in, an open blue binder clasped to the chest, the handheld radio in the other hand. Camille puts the binder down on the table, open. Simon wakes up.)

CAMILLE. It wasn't in the grey cabinet. There were three binders, and the third one was empty. I opened every drawer on the second floor. It was in the old levee office, under a pile of maps.

MARTHE. It's been an hour and a half.

CAMILLE. I read it, too. On the stairs.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. The light on the stairs hasn't worked for months. I read it by the light of my phone. I shouldn't have. But the page was marked with a red paper clip, and when someone puts in a red paper clip, you read.

SIMON. That's mine, the paper clip.

CAMILLE. "Saules section: core not built." It's crossed out. Next to it: "reservation lifted." And two sets of initials. M. A. S. A.

(Camille turns the binder towards Marthe.)

CAMILLE. Aubry. Marthe Aubry. Simon Aubry.

MARTHE. Yes.

CAMILLE. I don't know how to read an acceptance report. I know how to read levels and times. But I know how to read a crossed-out word.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Is it going to give way?

SIMON. Yes.

MARTHE. Simon.

SIMON. Yes, Camille. If we don't open, it gives way. I don't know what time.

I know where.

CAMILLE. At the Saules.

SIMON. Behind my house.

CAMILLE. And if we open, my father has two metres of water under the attic, with a lady who can't climb the stairs any more.

SIMON. Yes.

CAMILLE. Have you got any answer other than yes?

SIMON. No.

(Camille turns to Marthe.)

CAMILLE. And you?

MARTHE. I have a town of two thousand eight hundred people, six hundred of whom are still asleep behind the Saules because they don't believe the loudhailer. I have forty-one residents at Les Tilleuls and ambulances doing runs. I have a house on a knoll with two people in it. That isn't an answer, Camille. It's a list.

CAMILLE. You said it on television, that figure. Seven metres forty. My father had the set on in the kitchen. He turned the sound up. He said: "You see, Marthe knows what she's doing."

MARTHE. I believed it.

CAMILLE. Believed what? That the crossed-out word would grow back on its own?

(A pause. Marthe doesn't answer.)

SIMON. Camille. I'm the one who crossed it out.

CAMILLE. I know. I saw the handwriting. It's the same as on the levee signs, "No parking on the crest." You write your sevens the way they teach you at school, with a bar through the middle.

(The handheld radio crackles. A voice, breaking up.)

CAMILLE. Pontvieux town hall, go ahead. Say again, Moulins.

(The voice, longer. Camille writes on the back of one hand, then copies it into the register.)

CAMILLE. Received. Out.

CAMILLE. One fifty. Moulins-la-Roche, seven metres oh five. There was a storm over the top of the catchment, they didn't see it coming. They say the peak is coming earlier and higher. Six o'clock. Seven metres twenty-five at the bridge.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. And the bridge, just now: six metres oh eight.

(Simon gets up and goes to the map. He counts on his fingers, without a word. Marthe and Camille watch him.)

SIMON. The Saules at six eighty around half past five. Maybe sooner. For the plain to have time to take the water before the Saules let go, we have to open at five. At the latest.

MARTHE. You said three.

SIMON. Three was so they'd have time to get up to the attic. Five is for the levee.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I've got three hours left.

SIMON. You've got one hour left for them. After that, all you'll have left is the levee.

CAMILLE. One hour to do what? They can't get out. The road's under water, the tractor won't get across the ford.

MARTHE. A boat.

SIMON. Marthe.

MARTHE. A flat-bottomed boat goes anywhere there's forty centimetres of water. The Aulnes road is forty centimetres, maybe sixty. The fire brigade have three boats. Camille, call the fire station. I want a boat for the Aulnes knoll. Right now.

CAMILLE. They've got all three in Les Prés-Neufs. For the people who didn't believe the loudhailer.

MARTHE. Then they take one from Les Prés-Neufs and send it to the Aulnes. They're my boats, it's my town, it's my mother. Call them.

(Camille picks up the landline and dials. Simon looks at Marthe.)

SIMON. If you take a boat from Les Prés-Neufs to go and fetch Mum, you'll

have to say that too, tomorrow.

MARTHE. I'll say everything, tomorrow. Anything you like. Tonight, I want a boat.

CAMILLE. Fire station? Pontvieux town hall. The mayor is requesting a boat for the Aulnes knoll. Two people, one of whom can't walk. Yes. I'll hold.

(Camille waits, the receiver to one ear. Marthe and Simon don't look at each other. Rain.)

(Blackout.)

ACT THREE: HALF PAST THREE

SCENE 1

(The same room. On the table, the blue binder, paper cups, three crumpled sheets. Simon, in a T-shirt, his oilskin hung over the back of a chair, is writing on a fourth sheet. Camille at the register, the landline receiver lying beside it, off the hook. The rain, finer now.)

CAMILLE. Three twenty-five. Six metres thirty-four.

(Camille writes. Simon crumples the sheet and takes another.)

CAMILLE. That's the fifth.

SIMON. I can count.

CAMILLE. Did she say how long, the mayor?

SIMON. As long as it takes to talk to the fire chief. He came over specially, he's downstairs, in the hall. The two of them are standing in front of the fire brigade's map, and she's asking him questions he's already answered on the phone.

CAMILLE. Why?

SIMON. Because standing in front of a map, you can say no for longer.

(A pause. Camille puts the receiver back.)

CAMILLE. My father signed the agreement. In 2006.

SIMON. Everyone signed.

CAMILLE. Not your mother.

SIMON. Not my mother.

CAMILLE. He got the compensation. He bought the high barn with it, up on the slope, to keep the animals dry if one day. He used to say: "It's money they're giving us for something that'll never happen." He said the mayor had promised, in the village hall.

SIMON. She didn't promise. She said "in the event of an exceptional flood." She said it three times. Nobody heard "exceptional."

CAMILLE. I was there.

SIMON. At the village hall?

CAMILLE. I was four. I remember an apple cake, metal chairs that scraped, and a man standing up showing a map with the whole plain coloured in blue.

SIMON. That was me. The blue was me.

CAMILLE. You had hair.

SIMON. I had hair.

(The radio crackles. A voice, numbers. Camille writes without looking up.)

CAMILLE. Three thirty-five. Six metres thirty-seven.

(A pause.)

SIMON. I coloured that map in by hand, the night before, in felt tip. Eleven farms. Le Gué, your place. La Grange-Basse, the Merciers. Le Moulin-Neuf. Les Trois-Chênes. The Rousseau farm. La Pâtur. The two Bordes, the big one and the little one. La Croix. La Saulaie. And the knoll. I left the knoll white, in the middle, a white circle. Your mother...

CAMILLE. My mother left when I was six.

SIMON. I'm sorry.

CAMILLE. You couldn't have known. You were already living in Rue des Saules.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. After that, it was your mother's I went to, after school. The bus dropped me at the crossroads, I walked up the knoll, and she'd be waiting in the kitchen. I did my homework on her oilcloth for ten years. She made me say my times tables with walnuts. One walnut for every right answer. She said I'd end up with teeth like a squirrel.

SIMON. She did the same to us.

CAMILLE. She told me about you. The little one who measured everything. Who measured the water in the ditch with a dressmaker's ruler, every morning, and wrote it down in a notebook.

SIMON. I've still got it, the notebook.

CAMILLE. She used to say: "Simon always knows where the water will be. Marthe always knows where the people will be."

(Simon puts the pen down.)

SIMON. She said that?

CAMILLE. Several times. She also said you didn't come often enough.

SIMON. That, I knew.

(The radio crackles. Camille writes.)

CAMILLE. Three forty-five. Six metres thirty-nine. An hour and a quarter left.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. If the boat goes, I'm coming.

SIMON. It won't go.

CAMILLE. If it goes.

SIMON. If a boat goes, I'm the one who goes. I know the way through the hedges. I know where the fences are under the water, where the ditch is, where the current turns. You stay at the register.

CAMILLE. Why?

SIMON. Because someone has to write down the time.

CAMILLE. Anyone can write down the time.

SIMON. No. Not her, not me. Not any more. From tonight on, every time she or I write down a time, someone will wonder if it's the real one. You, they'll believe.

CAMILLE. I didn't ask to be believed.

SIMON. Nobody asks for that.

(A pause. Camille looks at the sheet in front of Simon.)

CAMILLE. What are you writing that takes you five sheets?

SIMON. The number. The number is one line. It's what comes after the number that I can't manage to write.

CAMILLE. And if she doesn't open? If she waits for the boat, and the boat doesn't go?

SIMON. Then the Saules will go.

CAMILLE. I can call the spillway. They're three kilometres away, they've got the radio, they're waiting for an order. I say: "This is town hall, open." They open.

SIMON. They won't open on your say-so. They need the order signed by the mayor, read out on the radio with the time and the number. Article six.

CAMILLE. Your regulations.

SIMON. My regulations. I wrote them so nobody could drown the plain on their own, in the middle of the night, on a whim.

CAMILLE. And tonight, nobody can save it on their own, the plain. Or the town. It has to be her.

SIMON. It has to be her.

CAMILLE. Did you write them for that as well?

SIMON. No. But that's what they do.

(Footsteps on the stairs. Simon picks up the pen again.)

SCENE 2

(Marthe comes in. She has her coat over her shoulders, wet. She goes straight to the map.)

SIMON. Well?

MARTHE. He says no.

CAMILLE. To the boat?

MARTHE. He says the Vionne is already coming through the Aulnes ditch. That on the road it isn't forty centimetres of water any more, it's forty centimetres of river, with a current in it, and tree trunks. He lost a boat earlier in Les Prés-Neufs, against a post, two men in the water, they were pulled out. He says he won't put a boat on the plain before it's light.

SIMON. He's right.

MARTHE. I know he's right. I didn't ask him to be right.

SIMON. Give me the boat, I'll go. I know the hedges.

MARTHE. He won't give you a boat. I asked him. I told him you knew the hedges. He told me that at this time of night the hedges are two metres under water in the dips and that's where his boat turned over. He said to me: "Madam Mayor, I won't let you drown your brother to save your mother. Choose one person to lose tonight, that's already a lot."

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. He said that?

MARTHE. He's been doing the job for thirty years. He's entitled.

SIMON. What time, for a boat?

MARTHE. Six o'clock. When Les Prés-Neufs are empty. If it's light enough.

SIMON. Six is too late.

MARTHE. For whom?

SIMON. For everyone. At six, if you haven't opened, there'll be no levee left at the Saules. And if you have opened, the water will be in the kitchen before the boat.

MARTHE. You said "maybe."

SIMON. What?

MARTHE. Earlier. You said "six eighty, six ninety, I don't know." You said: "It could hold till morning." I heard you.

SIMON. I also said it could go in an hour.

MARTHE. The levee held in 2016 with boils. It held in ninety-four. It's held for a hundred years, with or without your clay. If I wait till six. If the boat goes at six, if it brings them back, and I open at a quarter past six...

SIMON. At a quarter past six, opening the spillway won't do any good. The plain won't have time to fill before the peak. You'll drown the Aulnes, and the Saules will go anyway. The Aulnes and Les Prés-Neufs. Both.

MARTHE. If the levee holds.

SIMON. It won't hold.

MARTHE. You don't know that. You've just said so, you don't know.

SIMON. I know there's no clay at the Saules. I know because I crossed out the sentence that said so. And now you know too. You can't go on acting as if you didn't.

MARTHE. I'm not acting anything.

SIMON. You're doing exactly what you did in 2006. You're looking for the number that suits you and asking me to sign it.

MARTHE. Then give me another one, another number. The spillway has six gates. What if I open three?

SIMON. Three gates.

MARTHE. Three gates. Half the water on the plain. Half the height at the knoll. One metre instead of two. One metre is the kitchen, it isn't the ceiling. And the bridge drops thirty centimetres instead of sixty. Thirty centimetres, Simon, that puts us under your six eighty.

(Simon goes to the map. He looks for a long time, without answering.)

SIMON. No.

MARTHE. You haven't worked it out.

SIMON. I worked it out in 2005. I worked it out in July, in the attic. I worked it out just now on the levee, on my knees in the mud, by torchlight. Three gates, the plain fills more slowly, but it still fills to the same level, because the plain is a basin. It just takes longer. One metre at the knoll around seven, two metres around ten. And all that time, the bridge only drops twenty centimetres. The Saules won't hold with twenty centimetres.

MARTHE. Are you sure?

SIMON. I'm sure of the basin. The basin is geography. I'm not the one who crossed that out.

(A pause.)

SIMON. Half open, you drown the plain and you save nothing.

(A pause. Marthe sits down.)

CAMILLE. Five to four. Six metres forty-one.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Call them.

MARTHE. What?

CAMILLE. Call the house. They're awake now. With the radio, the rain, they're awake. Before you decide anything at all, call them. You owe them that. I owe it to my father.

(Marthe looks at Camille. Then she takes out her mobile and dials. It rings, twice, then someone picks up.)

MARTHE. Yann? It's Marthe.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Yes. She told me. She told me you were snoring.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Listen to me. You have to get her up to the attic. Now. Not in an hour, now.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I know she doesn't want to. You pick her up in your arms and you carry her up. She weighs forty kilos. She'll bite you, she'll call you every name under the sun, you carry her up.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. On the stairs? Sitting down?

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Which step?

(A long pause.)

MARTHE. Put her on.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. She won't talk to me. All right. No, don't force her. Don't force her into that.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Yes. Camille's here. Hold on.

(She holds the mobile out to Camille. Camille takes it.)

CAMILLE. Dad.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Yes. At the town hall. Till morning.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. I know. I saw the text. One word, Dad. "Here." Couldn't you have written two?

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Where is she, exactly?

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. With her coat on. And her handbag. On the second step.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Then you go up. Go up to the attic, you at least. Dad. Listen to me. If we open...

(A long pause. Camille listens. Camille says nothing.)

CAMILLE. All right.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. I'll tell her. Yes. You too.

(Camille hands the mobile back to Marthe, who takes it without looking at Camille.)

MARTHE. What did he say?

CAMILLE. He says the high barn is dry. That the animals are dry. That your mother has put her coat on, she's taken her handbag, she's sat down on the second step of the stairs, and she won't budge from there. She says that's where the water stops. He says he'll stay with her, on the step above.

MARTHE. And?

CAMILLE. He says to open.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. He says: "Tell Marthe to open. We took the money for this."

(A long pause. Rain. Marthe stands up.)

SCENE 3

(Marthe goes to the table. She holds out her hand to Simon. Simon gives her the sheet he was writing. She reads it, standing.)

MARTHE. Read it out.

SIMON. You've read it.

MARTHE. Read it out loud. Camille will put it in the register.

(Simon takes the sheet back.)

SIMON. "Pontvieux, the twenty-sixth of March, four twelve a.m. Opinion of the levee engineer. Above six metres eighty on the bridge gauge, a breach of the levee is probable at the Saules section, where the clay core was never built, contrary to what is stated in the acceptance report of the twenty-ninth of December 2006. Opinion: immediate opening of the Aulnes spillway. Simon Aubry, engineer."

(A pause. Camille writes.)

MARTHE. "Contrary to what is stated."

SIMON. That's what came after the number.

MARTHE. It's well written.

SIMON. I had five sheets to practise on.

(He signs. He puts the sheet down in front of Marthe.)

MARTHE. Camille. A new page.

CAMILLE. There.

MARTHE. Order number...

CAMILLE. There's never been an order before.

MARTHE. Then number one.

(Camille writes. Marthe dictates, slowly. Camille repeats each word quietly while writing.)

MARTHE. "Opening order number one. The twenty-sixth of March, four nineteen a.m. Having regard to the regulations of the Aulnes spillway, article four. Having regard to the written opinion of the levee engineer, four twelve a.m.

The mayor of Pontvieux orders the full opening of the Aulnes spillway."

CAMILLE. "Full."

MARTHE. Full. Half open drowns the plain and saves nothing.

CAMILLE. "Full." And then?

MARTHE. Then nothing. The signature.

SIMON. I'll sign with you.

MARTHE. No.

SIMON. We signed together, in 2006.

MARTHE. In 2006, the regulations didn't exist. Article four: "ordered by the mayor." Not "by the mayor and her brother." You've given your opinion. This is my order.

SIMON. Marthe.

MARTHE. You wanted nobody to be able to drown the plain on their own. You managed it. I'm not drowning it on my own. But I'm the one who's drowning it.

(Camille turns the register towards Marthe. Marthe takes Camille's pen.)

MARTHE. Is this pen yours?

CAMILLE. It belongs to the town hall.

MARTHE. Good.

(She signs. She puts the pen down next to the register. She doesn't take her hand away.)

MARTHE. Read it to them.

(Camille takes the radio.)

CAMILLE. Spillway, this is Pontvieux town hall. Opening order number one, four nineteen. The mayor orders the full opening of the Aulnes spillway. I repeat. Full opening. Confirm.

(The radio crackles. A voice, a few words.)

CAMILLE. Yes. Signed. With the engineer's opinion.

(The radio crackles again. A question, longer. Camille doesn't answer

straight away. Camille looks at Marthe.)

CAMILLE. They're asking if the knoll has been evacuated.

MARTHE. Tell them the truth.

CAMILLE. No. The knoll has not been evacuated. There are two people in the house. The order stands. Out.

(A pause. The radio goes quiet.)

(Then, far off, a siren. One long note, which rises and holds. It can be heard through the rain.)

(No one moves.)

SIMON. The bottom of the Aulnes in half an hour. The ditch has been running since three o'clock, there's already water on the plain.

MARTHE. I know.

SIMON. The knoll in an hour. Not two.

MARTHE. I know, Simon.

(The siren stops. Only the rain now.)

CAMILLE. Four twenty-two. Six metres forty-six.

(Camille writes.)

(Blackout.)

ACT FOUR: DAWN

SCENE 1

(The same room. A grey light comes in through the windows. The register lies open, no one in front of it. Marthe at the window, standing. Simon comes in, covered in mud again, the head torch lit on his forehead. He switches it off.)

SIMON. The Saules held.

(Marthe doesn't turn round.)

SIMON. The boils stopped growing at about half past five. By six, the water was coming out clear. The lads from the roads department are asleep in the truck, on the sandbags. The bridge is at six metres fifty-eight. It's been

falling since a quarter to six.

MARTHE. Camille told me.

SIMON. Where's Camille?

MARTHE. Downstairs, with the fire chief. They're counting the people from Les Tilleuls.

(A pause.)

SIMON. The house?

MARTHE. The landline stopped ringing at half past five. It rang and rang, then nothing. The internet box is in the hall, on the floor.

SIMON. And Yann?

MARTHE. Voicemail.

(A pause. Simon comes over to her, at the window.)

MARTHE. You can see the plain from here. I didn't know. Twenty-five years in this office, and I'd never noticed you could see the plain. There has to be water on it.

SIMON. It's the light. It throws the sky back.

MARTHE. Where's the white circle?

(Simon points, through the glass.)

SIMON. There. Left of the poplar. The dark square, that's the roof of the house. You can see the chimney.

MARTHE. Is it smoking?

SIMON. No.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Do you remember the mark?

SIMON. On the second step.

MARTHE. The red line. Grandfather painted it after fifty-five, with the tractor paint, and Dad went over it every spring. She was fifteen, in fifty-five. She used to tell us her father carried the pig up the stairs, the pig in his arms, and it squealed, the pig, all night long, on the landing. And in the morning, the water was there. Right there, at the edge

of the line.

SIMON. I used to measure it every Sunday. With the dressmaker's ruler. Twelve centimetres above the first step. Twelve centimetres. Always. I couldn't understand why I always got the same answer, I was seven, I thought the water was going to come back and the line would move.

MARTHE. She's sat down on it. On the line.

SIMON. I know.

MARTHE. With her handbag. What's in her handbag, Simon? What do you put in your handbag to go and sit on a staircase?

SIMON. Her glasses. Her rosary, that she doesn't say any more. The deeds to the house.

MARTHE. The deeds to the house.

SIMON. She's always kept them in her bag. Ever since the agreement. She used to say: "If they ever come and ask me to sign, I want to be able to show them it's mine."

(A pause.)

SIMON. I'm going to the prefecture at nine. With the binder.

MARTHE. We're going to the prefecture at nine.

SIMON. You didn't cross anything out. It's my handwriting.

MARTHE. I put my initials next to it. And in October 2007, I was the one who presented the budget amendment. Nobody gave you a chair that day either.

SIMON. You're going to lose the town hall.

MARTHE. The town hall isn't mine. I've only held on to it for a long time.

(A pause.)

SIMON. The fire chief is putting a boat in the water at seven. The current's dropped, it's light. I'm going with them.

MARTHE. He's willing now?

SIMON. It's light. And I told him I wasn't asking his permission.

(A pause.)

SIMON. Come with me.

MARTHE. In the boat?

SIMON. There's room. The chief won't say anything.

MARTHE. The chief will say the mayor left her town hall on a flood morning to go and fetch her mother. And he'll be right. I have to stay where people can find me. The people from Les Prés-Neufs are going home at eight, they'll see their cellars, they'll call here. Someone has to pick up, and it has to be me.

SIMON. Camille can pick up.

MARTHE. Camille has been picking up all night.

(A pause.)

SIMON. The notebook. The one from the ditch, and the others after it. Forty years of measurements, and my copies of the nineteen reports, with page three. In my office, at the levee, the left-hand drawer.

MARTHE. Why are you telling me this?

SIMON. At nine, they'll want to know how long I'd known. It's all in there, dated, in my hand. If the boat keeps me out there, take them all of it. Don't let them go looking.

(He puts his oilskin back on. He switches the head torch on again, then off.)

MARTHE. Simon.

SIMON. Yes.

MARTHE. Take a dry shirt, when you get there. In the wardrobe in your room. Your room's upstairs, under the roof, they'll be dry. She's ironed them.

SIMON. I know.

(He goes out. Marthe stays at the window.)

SCENE 2

(Camille comes in, carrying two paper cups of coffee. Camille puts one down on the windowsill, near Marthe, and goes to the register with the other.)

CAMILLE. Simon's gone with the boat.

MARTHE. I know.

CAMILLE. Les Tilleuls is empty. The last ambulance left at ten past five. Forty-one out of forty-one. The lady who couldn't sit up is at the hospital, she asked for her false teeth, they'd forgotten them, someone's going back for them. In Les Prés-Neufs, there's water in the cellars, in Rue des Saules and Rue du Moulin. Not in the streets. The school is dry.

MARTHE. The school is dry.

CAMILLE. I've written it down.

(A pause. Marthe doesn't touch the coffee.)

MARTHE. Sit down, Camille.

CAMILLE. I'm at the register.

MARTHE. You can keep a register perfectly well from a chair. The people who kept this register before you were sitting down. There have been seventy years of them. The register from fifty-five is in the archives, next to the grey cabinet. You'll see, the handwriting slopes more and more as it gets towards morning.

(Camille sits down.)

MARTHE. What did she say about me?

CAMILLE. Who?

MARTHE. In her kitchen. During homework. With the walnuts.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. She cut out your articles. From the paper. Whenever there was a photo of you, at an opening, in front of a ribbon. She cut them out with the poultry shears, because nobody was allowed to touch her sewing scissors. She kept them in the sewing box, under the button tray.

MARTHE. The sewing box is in the attic.

CAMILLE. Then your articles are in the attic.

MARTHE. What did she say?

CAMILLE. She said you called her every Sunday at noon. On the dot of twelve. And that you hung up at twelve minutes past. She watched the clock. She said: "Twelve minutes. Like the twelve centimetres of the line. My daughter loves me exactly up to the line."

(A pause.)

MARTHE. I had the meeting with my deputies at a quarter past twelve.

CAMILLE. On Sundays?

MARTHE. No. On Sundays, there was nothing.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Can I ask you something?

MARTHE. Tonight, you can ask me anything. Tomorrow, I may not be someone people ask any more.

CAMILLE. Tonight, when you signed the order, you knew what you were signing.

MARTHE. Yes.

CAMILLE. And in 2006? On the twenty-ninth of December, when it was snowing?

MARTHE. In 2006 as well. I knew. I just arranged to forget. It takes longer than a signature, forgetting. A signature takes a second. Forgetting took me nineteen years, and you have to start again every morning.

CAMILLE. My father didn't know.

MARTHE. No. Your father signed an agreement that I put in front of him in a village hall, with an apple cake. He believed what I said. He believed what I said on television.

CAMILLE. He still believes it. He said: "We took the money for this." He thinks that was the price. That the plain was paid to be drowned one day, and that when the day came, it was just bad luck. He doesn't know the plain was drowned for three hundred metres of clay that nobody put in.

MARTHE. You'll tell him.

CAMILLE. No.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. You will.

MARTHE. Me.

CAMILLE. You'll go to Le Gué, when the water's gone down. You'll go up to the high barn. You'll tell him. Not on television. In the barn, in front of the cows.

MARTHE. I'll go.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Read me the night.

CAMILLE. All of it?

MARTHE. The times. The levels. What you wrote beside them.

(Camille turns the pages back. Camille reads, without hurrying.)

CAMILLE. "Eleven p.m. Five metres fifty-eight. Prefecture remains available." "Ten past eleven. Five metres sixty-one." "Quarter past eleven. Arrival of the levee engineer. Boils at the Saules." "Ten to twelve. Call from Mrs Odette Aubry, Aulnes knoll." "One a.m. Five metres ninety-five." That one's your handwriting. "One fifty. Moulins, seven metres oh five. Peak brought forward." "Two a.m. Boat requested, fire station." "Three fifty-five. Boat refused." "Four twelve. Engineer's opinion." "Four nineteen. Order number one." "Four twenty-two. Six metres forty-six. Siren." "Five thirty. Phone at the knoll no longer answering." "Five forty. Six metres seventy-one." "Six a.m. Six metres sixty-eight. Falling."

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. After that, I only wrote the numbers.

MARTHE. Six metres seventy-one.

CAMILLE. That's the highest.

MARTHE. Nine centimetres under Simon's number.

CAMILLE. Nine centimetres.

MARTHE. If I hadn't opened, we'll never know if the levee would have held. We'll never know. That's what they'll say to me, and they'll be right: maybe it would have held.

CAMILLE. There was no clay in it.

MARTHE. No. There was no clay in it.

(On the table, Camille's phone vibrates. Camille looks at it. Doesn't pick it up straight away.)

SCENE 3

(Camille picks up the phone.)

CAMILLE. Dad.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. I can hardly hear you. There's wind. Where are you?

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. On the roof. Through the attic skylight. All right.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Yes, it's light. We can see the chimney from here. Simon saw it.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Dad. Where is she?

(A long pause. Camille listens. Marthe, at the window, doesn't turn round.)

CAMILLE. Don't hang up. Simon's coming. He left at seven with the fire brigade's boat, he's coming through the hedges.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Can you see him? With a light on his head. Yes. That's him.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. Save your battery. Hang up, save your battery for him. I'm staying here. I'm not going anywhere.

(Camille puts the phone down on the register. A pause. Marthe asks nothing.)

CAMILLE. He's been on the roof since it started getting light. He climbed out through the skylight, to get a signal and so they'd see him. His hands are cold. He can see the boat, it's two hedges from the house.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. At twenty past five, the water came in under the door. She was on the second step, with her coat and her bag. Him on the step above. The water covered the tiles, then the first step. He says it was coming up fast, you could see it rising. She said: "You see, Yann. The water's going to stop."

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. At about twenty to six, the water touched the line. He told her to go up. She said: "You go up. I'm watching where the water stops." He tried to pick her up. She was holding the banister. With both hands. He says he couldn't. He didn't want to break her fingers.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. So she asked him to go up to the attic and see if the albums were dry. He went up. The albums were dry. When he tried to come back down, the attic door wouldn't open. The wood had swollen with the damp, and it had jammed shut behind him.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. He called to her, through the door. She answered. She told him not to force it, he'd put his shoulder out. She kept telling him where the water was. The fourth step. The fifth. He threw his shoulder against the door, for a long time. When it gave, the water covered half the stairs.

(A pause.)

CAMILLE. He called her. He says he called her for a long time. He didn't hear her after twenty past six.

(A long pause. Rain. Marthe turns round. She comes to the table. She looks at the register, at the phone lying on it.)

MARTHE. A new page.

(Camille turns the page.)

MARTHE. What time is it?

CAMILLE. Seven twelve.

MARTHE. The bridge?

CAMILLE. Six metres fifty-two.

MARTHE. Write. "Seven twelve. Six metres fifty-two."

(Camille writes.)

MARTHE. "The Saules section held."

(Camille writes.)

MARTHE. "The works on this section, entered as a reservation in the acceptance report of the twenty-ninth of December 2006, were never carried out. The reservation was lifted that day by the mayor and by the levee engineer, who both knew. In October 2007, the mayor diverted the funds voted for these works to other spending. She signed nineteen reports which said so."

(Camille writes. The pen stops.)

CAMILLE. "Which said so."

MARTHE. "Which said so, on page three."

(Camille writes.)

MARTHE. "During the night, the Aulnes plain was flooded on the orders of the mayor, at four nineteen a.m."

(Camille writes.)

MARTHE. "Mrs Odette Aubry, eighty-six, Aulnes knoll..."

(She stops.)

CAMILLE. Shall I write "missing"?

MARTHE. No.

(A pause.)

MARTHE. Write: "Stayed on the second step."

(Camille writes. A pause.)

MARTHE. Leave some space underneath. For Simon. He'll sign when he gets back.

CAMILLE. How much space?

MARTHE. One line. He writes small.

(Camille leaves a line. Camille turns the register towards Marthe and hands her the pen. Marthe signs. She puts the pen down.)

MARTHE. Read me the signature.

CAMILLE. "Marthe Aubry."

MARTHE. Write next to it: "mayor of Pontvieux."

CAMILLE. It's already printed, at the top of the page.

MARTHE. Write it anyway. By hand.

(Camille writes.)

(Marthe takes her coat from the back of a chair. She puts it on.)

MARTHE. I'm going down to the hall. The people from Les Prés-Neufs will start arriving. I want to be at the bottom of the stairs when they come in.

CAMILLE. And the prefecture? At nine?

MARTHE. I'll be there, with Simon and the binder. The register, you'll be the one who carries it. You, they'll believe.

(She goes towards the door. She stops.)

MARTHE. Camille.

CAMILLE. Yes.

MARTHE. Your father. When the boat brings him back, come and get me. And tell him I'll come to Le Gué. To the high barn. Tell him I have something to tell him, and that it will take a long time.

CAMILLE. I'll tell him.

(Marthe goes out. Her footsteps on the stairs, then the door, downstairs.)

(Only Camille is left, at the register. The day is rising. The radio crackles. A voice, a few numbers.)

CAMILLE. Pontvieux town hall. Received.

(Camille writes.)

CAMILLE. Twenty past seven. Bridge gauge: six metres forty-eight. Falling.

(Camille puts the pen down. Rain, on the windows.)

(Blackout.)



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