

Sold Twice

Farce · 6-character play · 4 women, 1 man, 1 either · 80 min · Advanced

At the Hôtel de la Gare in Vichy, everyone is waiting for tomorrow's incognito visit from someone sent by a hotel guide. Odette, the owner, is drowning in debt and has secretly sold half of her hotel to two different people. Both of them turn up on the same evening, each convinced they are the only one. Getting through to morning will take doors, a boiler and a great deal of nerve, especially since her daughter, her receptionist and her oldest guest are each hiding something too.

The lobby, then the first-floor corridor of the Hôtel de la Gare in Vichy, France, from a Friday evening in October to the following morning, the present day.

Casting

ODETTE (Female role, Senior) 68, has run the Hôtel de la Gare since 1979; widowed six years ago.

SOPHIE (Female role, Adult) 44, her daughter, moved to Lyon twenty years ago; works for a bank.

ZOÉ (Female role, Young adult) 23, the hotel's receptionist for the past year; also does the cooking and the rooms.

IRÈNE (Female role, Senior) 81, has stayed in room 7 every autumn since 1979.

VICTOR (Male role, Adult) 54, a retired heating engineer from Saint-Étienne who sold his business in the spring.

CHARLIE (No gender marker, Adult) forties, left an office job in Paris; spent one night at the hotel last winter.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1

(The lobby of the Hôtel de la Gare. A reception desk, a board of keys, a brass desk bell. A staircase leads up to the rooms. One door opens onto the lounge, another onto the kitchen. The front door is glazed. Friday evening. Zoé is polishing the bell with a cloth. Odette is sorting the post.)

ZOÉ

It doesn't ring true.

ODETTE

It's been ringing since 1961. It's not going to change its tune for a guidebook.

(Zoé taps the bell. A dull clunk.)

ZOÉ

Hear that? It sounds tired. A guest walks in, hears that, and thinks: everything here is tired.

ODETTE

Everything here is tired. That's why people come. Vichy is a town where people come to rest.

ZOÉ

Not the person from the guide. A guide comes to give marks.

ODETTE

Zoé. It's nine o'clock at night. The inspection is tomorrow.

ZOÉ

"On the first Saturday in October, a member of our inspection team will stay at your establishment, unannounced, as an ordinary guest." Signed: Madame Delorme, Head of Inspections. Unannounced, Madame Odette. That means we won't know who it is. It could be anyone. It could already be in town.

ODETTE

You know that letter from the guide by heart.

ZOÉ

I had it laminated. It's in the kitchen, above the sink. That way I see it while I'm doing the washing-up.

ODETTE

And does that make you wash up faster?

ZOÉ

It makes me wash up better.

(Zoé takes a list out of her pocket.)

ZOÉ

I've made a list. The doilies in the lounge: they go.

ODETTE

Madame Irène is fond of them.

ZOÉ

Madame Irène isn't the guide. The pot plant on the stairs: it's dead.

ODETTE

It's resting.

ZOÉ

Since May. The picture in the lobby: it's crooked.

ODETTE

It's crooked because the wall is crooked. If you straighten the picture, people will see the wall.

(A pause. Zoé puts an envelope on the desk.)

ZOÉ

A registered letter came this afternoon. I signed for it.

ODETTE

Who from?

ZOÉ

The bank.

(Odette takes the letter without opening it and slides it into a drawer.)

ODETTE

They write a lot, at the bank. They get bored.

ZOÉ

That's the third registered letter.

ODETTE

Then they're very bored.

(The hotel phone rings. Odette picks up.)

ODETTE

Hôtel de la Gare, good evening.

(She freezes.)

ODETTE

Victor? No, no, I'm pleased. I'm very pleased. Where are you? At the station? Which one? This one. Of course. This one. No, don't take a taxi, it's just opposite. You cross the road. Yes. A surprise. Oh, it's a surprise all right.

(She hangs up. She stays with her hand on the receiver.)

ZOÉ

A guest?

ODETTE

A former guest. A friend. He needs a room.

ZOÉ

We've got the coach party from Stuttgart, they've taken 2 to 11, except 5, 6 and 7. Seven is Madame Irène. And we're keeping 1 for the inspection.

ODETTE

Five.

ZOÉ

There's no hot water in 5 anymore. And it shares a bathroom with 6.

ODETTE

Six is empty. He'll have it to himself.

ZOÉ

And what if someone's in 6?

ODETTE

Nobody will be in 6. And besides, what if we cleared out 12 tomorrow? We could put the boxes from the lounge up there, it would make room for...

ZOÉ

No.

ODETTE

I beg your pardon?

ZOÉ

Not 12. It rains inside. The ceiling's all swollen, there's mould on the walls, it smells of wet dog. And we haven't got a dog. Nobody goes up to 12.

ODETTE

I haven't been up there since the winter.

ZOÉ

There you go. Don't. You'd slip. I'll do number 5.

(Zoé takes a key from the board and goes up the stairs, fast.)

SCENE 2

(Odette, alone, opens the drawer again, looks at the bank's letter, shuts it. Irène comes down the stairs in her dressing gown, an empty cup in her hand.)

IRÈNE

Odette, my herbal tea.

ODETTE

It's nine o'clock, Irène. You have it at half past nine.

IRÈNE

I'm early tonight. I can't sleep. It's the excitement.

ODETTE

You came in April, you're back in October. You'll end up living here.

IRÈNE

Now there's an idea.

ODETTE

What excitement?

IRÈNE

The inspection. Just think. Forty-seven years I've been coming here, and I've never seen an inspection. I saw the flood of 1987, I saw your sister's wedding, I saw the gentleman who died in number 9...

ODETTE

He didn't die, he was asleep.

IRÈNE

For three days. But an inspection, never. I've put on my necklace.

ODETTE

To go to bed?

IRÈNE

To be ready. You never know what time a guide will turn up. Your Madame Delorme doesn't say.

(Zoé comes back down, a pile of towels in her arms.)

ZOÉ

Five is done. Good evening, Madame Irène. Can't you sleep?

IRÈNE

You can't sleep either, Zoé. I see a light at night. Right up there. Under the roof.

(Zoé stops.)

ZOÉ

Under the roof?

IRÈNE

From my window you can see the skylight of number 12. There's a light on. Late. And sometimes music.

ZOÉ

That's a reflection. The street lamp by the station.

IRÈNE

The street lamp by the station listens to accordion music?

ZOÉ

It's the neighbours. Sound travels up. It's an old building, everything travels up.

ODETTE

Irène, I have a favour to ask you, for tomorrow.

IRÈNE

Anything you like.

ODETTE

When the person from the guide is here, we won't know who it is. So you'll need to look... happy.

IRÈNE

But I'm always happy. It's my great flaw.

ODETTE

Happy with the hotel. Say things, out loud, at breakfast. That the bed is comfortable. That the coffee is hot.

IRÈNE

The coffee isn't hot.

ODETTE

Tomorrow it will be.

ZOÉ

I bought a new coffee machine. With my own money.

IRÈNE

Then I'll say the bed is comfortable, the coffee is hot, and the young lady paid for the coffee machine.

ZOÉ

Not that.

IRÈNE

And that the bell rings true?

ODETTE

Don't push it.

(Irène goes back up the stairs with her empty cup.)

IRÈNE

My tea, Zoé. In number 7. And if you go up to 12 afterwards, turn the light off when you leave. It saves money.

(She goes out. Zoé hurries into the kitchen.)

SCENE 3

(Odette, alone. She turns towards a framed photograph on the wall behind the desk.)

ODETTE

Gérard, don't look at me like that. He's early, it's not my fault.

(The front door opens. Victor comes in, a suitcase in one hand, a toolbox in the other, a bottle of champagne under his arm.)

VICTOR

Partner!

ODETTE

Shh!

VICTOR

Partner.

ODETTE

Victor. What a surprise.

VICTOR

I know. We said next spring. But then I got your letter, and the inspection, a guide, at our place... I said to myself: Victor, your hotel is sitting an exam and you're staying in Saint-Étienne in front of the telly? No. I packed my case, I took my tools, I took a bottle. For afterwards. When we get the star.

ODETTE

We won't get a star, it's a little guide. They give out little coffee pots.

VICTOR

Then we'll get a coffee pot. I'll put it there, on the desk, next to the bell.

(He puts the bottle on the desk. Odette immediately hides it underneath.)

ODETTE

Victor, listen to me carefully. Nobody here knows.

VICTOR

Knows what?

ODETTE

About us. About the half. Not the receptionist, not the guests. Nobody.

VICTOR

Why not?

ODETTE

Because of the guide. If they find out a hotel is changing hands, they don't give it a rating. They wait for the new management. Three years. Four, sometimes.

VICTOR

Ah. I didn't know that.

ODETTE

It's well known in the trade.

VICTOR

Right. Then I won't say a word. My lips are sealed. I'm a guest. An ordinary guest.

ODETTE

That's it. Ordinary.

VICTOR

I can be very ordinary. My wife told me so for thirty years.

ODETTE

How is she?

VICTOR

She left. With a driving instructor. Mind you, she passed her test first time. You couldn't make it up.

ODETTE

I'm sorry.

VICTOR

I'm not. Well, a bit. In the evenings. Right. I'd like number 7.

ODETTE

Seven is taken.

VICTOR

Since when?

ODETTE

Since 1979.

VICTOR

Odette. October 1996. Martine and me, our wedding night. Number 7. The wallpaper with the blue birds, the washbasin that sang, the trains all night long. We didn't sleep a wink. That's why I bought. Well, that's why I answered your advert. I want to sleep in number 7.

ODETTE

There's a lady in 7. She comes every autumn. She's eighty-one and has a very good lawyer.

VICTOR

Fine. And tomorrow night?

ODETTE

Not tomorrow night either. Or next year. You've got number 5. Five is very nice.

VICTOR

Is there hot water?

ODETTE

You're a heating engineer.

VICTOR

Retired.

ODETTE

It'll come back to you.

(Zoé comes out of the kitchen with a tray holding a cup of herbal tea. She sees Victor and stops.)

ZOÉ

Good evening, sir.

VICTOR

Good evening! I'm a guest.

ZOÉ

I can see that.

VICTOR

An ordinary guest. Normal. Just like all the others.

(Zoé looks at him, looks at the toolbox, looks at Odette.)

ZOÉ

Are you here for the spa cure, sir?

VICTOR

For the waters. That's it. I've come to drink the waters. I love them, the waters.

ODETTE

Monsieur Victor is a former guest. He's been coming for years.

ZOÉ

I've never seen you before.

VICTOR

It's been a while. Thirty years. I had hair.

ODETTE

Zoé, Madame Irène's tea is getting cold.

ZOÉ

It's always cold. Madame Irène drinks it cold, she says it's better for the kidneys.

ODETTE

Then it'll warm up. Go on up.

(Zoé goes up the stairs, looking back at Victor over her shoulder.)

VICTOR

Was I good?

ODETTE

A little too ordinary. Go on up. Number 5. First floor, on the left. And don't talk to anyone.

VICTOR

Not even the lady in 7?

ODETTE

Especially not the lady in 7.

(Victor takes the key, the suitcase and the toolbox, and goes up.)

SCENE 4

(Odette, alone. She leans on the desk and breathes out.)

ODETTE

One night, Gérard. I just have to hold out for one night. The inspection tomorrow, he leaves on Sunday, and between now and the spring...

(The doorbell. Charlie comes in with a small suitcase, a tape measure clipped to the belt and a notebook in hand.)

CHARLIE

Good evening, Odette!

(Odette turns round. A pause.)

ODETTE

Charlie.

CHARLIE

I know. We said next summer. But your letter, the inspection... I couldn't wait. I caught the twelve minutes past six. I wanted to see our hotel the night before. The real one, the everyday one, before we make it look nice.

ODETTE

Our hotel.

CHARLIE

Half and half. I haven't slept since I signed. Well, I have: one night. Here. In February, during the rail strike. Nine hours straight, Odette. That hadn't happened to me since school.

(Charlie runs the tape measure along the desk.)

CHARLIE

Two metres forty. This desk will have to move. We open it up onto the lounge, we let the light in. Here, a big table, people working, living plants.

ODETTE

It's resting.

CHARLIE

Sorry?

ODETTE

Nothing. Charlie, there's something you need to know. Nobody here knows. About our arrangement.

CHARLIE

Of course. The staff. We'll announce it together, properly. I've already got a plan. A meeting, croissants.

ODETTE

The staff is one person.

CHARLIE

Then one croissant.

(Zoé comes back down the stairs with the empty tray. She sees Charlie, who is now measuring the width of the lounge door and writing in the notebook. She stands stock-still.)

CHARLIE

Good evening. A question: what time is breakfast?

ZOÉ

Seven till ten. Half past ten on Sundays. Coffee, tea, hot chocolate, freshly squeezed orange juice.

CHARLIE

Squeezed here?

ZOÉ

Squeezed by me.

(Charlie writes it down.)

CHARLIE

The towels, do you change them every day?

ZOÉ

Every day. Twice if asked. Three times for children.

CHARLIE

And how many of you work here?

ZOÉ

One.

(Charlie writes it down. Zoé grabs Odette by the sleeve and pulls her aside.)

ZOÉ

It's the inspection.

ODETTE

What?

ZOÉ

The notebook. The tape measure. The questions. They come the night before, Madame Odette, to see the hotel before we get it ready. It's clever. It's exactly what I'd do.

(Odette looks at Charlie. A pause.)

ODETTE

You think so?

ZOÉ

I'm certain. Nobody measures a door at nine o'clock at night.

ODETTE

Then not a word. We know nothing. We carry on as usual.

ZOÉ

As usual, but better.

CHARLIE

Have you got a room left?

ODETTE

Number 1. I'll give you number 1, it's the nicest, it looks onto the park, it's well away from...

ZOÉ

Absolutely not. If we give the nicest one, we show we've guessed. An ordinary guest gets whatever's left.

ODETTE

What's left is number 6.

ZOÉ

Number 6.

(Zoé takes the key to 6 from the board and holds it out to Charlie with a big smile.)

ODETTE

Zoé, 6 shares a bathroom with 5.

ZOÉ

Exactly. It feels real. Room 6, first floor, at the end of the corridor. The bathroom is shared with room 5. There's someone in 5, but it's someone very quiet. An ordinary guest.

CHARLIE

Shared? That will have to change.

(Charlie writes in the notebook. Zoé drops the tray and picks it up.)

ZOÉ

I'll carry your case up.

CHARLIE

Thanks, I can manage. Odette, see you tomorrow. We've got a lot to talk about.

(Charlie goes up the stairs. Zoé and Odette are left alone.)

ZOÉ

"That will have to change." Did you hear? Two minutes in the hotel and already a comment.

ODETTE

A comment is nothing.

ZOÉ

It's written down. In the notebook. What's written in the notebook gets written in the guide. I'm going to redo number 6. I'm going to put on

the embroidered sheets. I'm going to put out a flower.

ODETTE

We haven't got a flower.

ZOÉ

I'll take Madame Irène's.

(Zoé dashes up the stairs.)

SCENE 5

(Odette, alone, is looking for the bottle of champagne under the desk. Victor comes back down the stairs in a bathrobe, a towel over his shoulder, his toolbox in his hand. He puts it down at the foot of the stairs.)

VICTOR

Odette. There's no hot water.

ODETTE

I know.

VICTOR

And there's somebody in 6. I heard through the bathroom door. Somebody measuring. That little sound a tape measure makes when it snaps back. Zip. Zip. Who measures a bathroom at this time of night?

ODETTE

The inspection.

VICTOR

Already?

ODETTE

They come the night before. To see the hotel as it really is. It's well known in the trade.

VICTOR

And here's me in a bathrobe in the lobby. I haven't even shaved. Odette, I ran the cold tap for ten minutes, you can hear that. That'll go in the report.

ODETTE

Don't talk to the inspection. Above all, not about the hotel. You're a guest.

VICTOR

An ordinary guest.

ODETTE

Less ordinary than before. Just a guest.

(Charlie comes down the stairs, notebook in hand.)

CHARLIE

Odette, the radiator in 6 is making a noise like...

(Charlie sees Victor. Victor pulls his bathrobe tighter.)

VICTOR

Good evening.

CHARLIE

Good evening.

(Odette steps between them.)

ODETTE

He's the heating engineer.

CHARLIE

In a bathrobe?

ODETTE

He got wet. The pipes. I got him in for the boiler, before the inspection. He's sleeping here, it's simpler.

CHARLIE

Ah, very good. Very good. So, this boiler?

VICTOR

Excellent. A remarkable boiler. From 1974. They don't make them like that anymore.

CHARLIE

Exactly. It'll have to be replaced.

VICTOR

Replaced? You can't be serious. A boiler like that, you don't replace it, you nurse it.

CHARLIE

You're only saying that because it's your bread and butter.

VICTOR

Me? Not at all. I'm a guest.

(Odette stamps on his foot.)

VICTOR

A guest who fixes things. A heating engineer guest. I'm on holiday, but I fix things.

CHARLIE

Odette told me you were here for the boiler.

(Victor looks at Odette. Odette nods.)

VICTOR

Yes. I'm here for the boiler. I came three hundred kilometres for her.

CHARLIE

How much, to get it back in shape?

VICTOR

Oh, to get it back in shape, you're looking at... But why do you want to know?

CHARLIE

Send me the quote. Me, directly.

VICTOR

You? Why you?

ODETTE

For the file.

(A pause. Victor looks at Charlie, then at Odette, then at Charlie. He nods, slowly.)

VICTOR

The file. Of course. You'll have the quote. Itemised. Parts, labour, the lot. You'll see we hide nothing here.

CHARLIE

I hope not. And another thing: number 7, do you know if the wallpaper is original? The yellow flowers?

VICTOR

Flowers? There were blue birds.

CHARLIE

Yellow flowers. Everywhere. Even on the ceiling. The door was ajar,

there's a lady asleep in there wearing a necklace. It's the biggest room. I'd make it into a suite.

VICTOR

A suite? Number 7? You mustn't touch number 7. Nobody must ever touch number 7.

CHARLIE

Why not?

VICTOR

It's a historic room.

CHARLIE

Historic for whom?

VICTOR

For... Vichy. For France. Important people have slept there. Couples. Newlyweds.

CHARLIE

I don't see what difference that makes to a heating engineer.

VICTOR

The birds. The pipes. It's all connected.

ODETTE

Victor, the boiler.

VICTOR

I'm going. I'm off down. I'm going to the cellar.

(Victor picks up his toolbox from the foot of the stairs and goes out through the kitchen door. Charlie watches him go.)

CHARLIE

Your heating engineer is a bit odd.

ODETTE

He's very good. The very good ones are all a bit odd.

CHARLIE

We'll get another one. Good night, Odette. Tomorrow, we talk about the carpet.

(Charlie goes back up. Odette, alone, sits down on the bottom step.)

ODETTE

The carpet.

SCENE 6

(Zoé comes down the stairs, carefully carrying a pot of geraniums. She is about to step over Odette.)

ZOÉ

It's for number 6. I'm going to wash it in the sink, it's got dead leaves. Madame Irène is asleep, she won't notice a thing.

ODETTE

She'll notice the gap on her windowsill.

ZOÉ

I'll put it back at seven, before she wakes up.

ODETTE

She wakes up at six.

ZOÉ

Then at a quarter to six.

(A knock at the glass door. Odette jumps to her feet.)

ODETTE

Another one?

ZOÉ

Maybe it's a guest.

ODETTE

I don't want any more guests. I've had enough for one night. I'm going to fetch... something. In the lounge.

(Odette goes out through the lounge door. Zoé puts the geranium on the desk and goes to open the door. Sophie comes in, a large suitcase in each hand.)

ZOÉ

Good evening, madam. Welcome to the Hôtel de la Gare.

SOPHIE

Good evening.

(Sophie puts down her suitcases and looks round the lobby for a long time.)

SOPHIE

The picture's crooked.

ZOÉ

It's the wall.

SOPHIE

I know. And the plant on the stairs is dead.

ZOÉ

It's resting.

SOPHIE

Since when?

ZOÉ

Since May.

(Zoé takes a step back, looks at the suitcases, looks at Sophie.)

ZOÉ

Would you like a room?

SOPHIE

Have you got one left?

ZOÉ

We're full. Are you... are you on your own?

SOPHIE

Yes.

ZOÉ

You don't know anyone here? In number 6, for example?

SOPHIE

Why would I know anyone in number 6?

ZOÉ

No, of course not. You don't know each other. That's the rule.

SOPHIE

What rule?

ZOÉ

None. There's no rule. Would you like an orange juice? Freshly squeezed?
By me?

SOPHIE

Are you new?

ZOÉ

For a year now.

SOPHIE

I haven't been here for three years.

ZOÉ

You've been here before?

SOPHIE

I grew up here. Room 3 until I was ten, room 4 after that. I learned to walk in that corridor, I fell down these stairs, I kissed a boy from Clermont in that lounge. Then I left for Lyon.

ZOÉ

You're Sophie. Madame Odette's daughter.

SOPHIE

She's told you about me?

ZOÉ

Never. But there's a photo of you in the till drawer. Under the banknotes.

(Irène appears at the top of the stairs, in her dressing gown, the necklace round her neck.)

IRÈNE

Sophie! Little Sophie!

SOPHIE

Irène.

(Irène comes down as fast as she can. They hug.)

IRÈNE

You got my letter.

SOPHIE

I got your letter.

ZOÉ

What letter?

IRÈNE

A letter. For her birthday.

SOPHIE

My birthday's in April.

IRÈNE

I write early. At my age, you write early.

(Irène looks at the two suitcases.)

IRÈNE

Two suitcases, for an inspection?

SOPHIE

There are three more in the car.

(A pause. Irène takes Sophie's hand.)

SOPHIE

Don't tell her anything.

IRÈNE

I never tell anyone anything. It's my other flaw.

ZOÉ

Madame Irène, where's your geranium?

IRÈNE

On the desk, apparently.

(Odette comes back from the lounge, two doilies in her hand. She sees Sophie. She stops dead.)

ODETTE

Sophie.

SOPHIE

Hello, Mum.

ODETTE

What are you doing here?

SOPHIE

I've come for the inspection. To help you.

ODETTE

Who told you about the inspection?

(Sophie looks at Irène. Irène looks at the geranium.)

IRÈNE

It's a very well-known guide.

ODETTE

You've got work, in Lyon. You've got your bank.

SOPHIE

I've taken some leave.

ODETTE

How many days?

SOPHIE

A few.

ODETTE

With two suitcases.

SOPHIE

I didn't know what to pack. For an inspection.

ODETTE

There are no rooms left. The coach party from Stuttgart, number 1 is for the guide, 5 and 6 were taken this evening..

SOPHIE

By whom?

ODETTE

By guests. Ordinary guests. I've got nothing.

SOPHIE

I can sleep anywhere.

ODETTE

Number 12. We'll take a mattress up to 12.

ZOÉ

No!

(Everyone turns to look at Zoé. Blackout.)

ACT TWO

SCENE 1

(The first-floor corridor, at night. A nightlight. The doors, in order: number 6, the shared bathroom, number 5, number 7. Then the staircase going down to the lobby and, at the far end, a steep little staircase going up to number 12. From a distance, dull thuds in the pipes. Zoé comes down the little staircase, her arms full: a sleeping bag, a

toaster, a plant, an accordion.)

(Sophie comes up the stairs from the lobby, a toothbrush in her hand, heading for the bathroom. They see each other.)

SOPHIE

Moving out?

ZOÉ

Tidying up.

SOPHIE

At half past midnight. A toaster.

ZOÉ

It was lying around.

SOPHIE

In number 12. Where it rains. Where there's mould.

ZOÉ

The mould's quite friendly, really.

(Sophie looks at the accordion.)

SOPHIE

And that's the street lamp by the station, is it?

(Zoé puts everything down and sits on the bottom step of the little staircase.)

ZOÉ

I live up there. Since March. The landlord of my studio flat sold up, I had two weeks to get out, I couldn't find anything. Your mother thinks I live with my cousin in Cusset. I haven't got a cousin in Cusset. I haven't got a cousin.

SOPHIE

And what do you pay?

ZOÉ

Nothing. But I fix things. At night. I patched the ceiling, I repainted the wall, I put a tarpaulin on the roof. It hardly rains anymore. It only rains into a bucket, and I empty the bucket.

SOPHIE

And the accordion?

ZOÉ

It was my grandmother's. I play quietly. Madame Irène hears everything, but she likes it. She taps out the rhythm on her ceiling with her walking stick.

SOPHIE

Why don't you tell my mother?

ZOÉ

Because she'd tell me to take a proper room, and a proper room is a room you can let. She can't afford to give me a room she could let. She's had registered letters.

SOPHIE

How many?

ZOÉ

Three. From the bank.

(The door of number 7 opens. Zoé throws the sleeping bag over the toaster. Sophie sits on it. Irène appears in her nightdress, cup in hand.)

IRÈNE

Zoé, my tea was too hot.

ZOÉ

You drink it cold.

IRÈNE

Exactly. It was lukewarm. Good evening, Sophie. Comfortable?

SOPHIE

Very.

IRÈNE

On a toaster.

SOPHIE

It's a sleeping bag.

IRÈNE

With knobs on. Good night.

(Irène goes back into number 7 with her cup. Sophie gets up. A pause.)

SOPHIE

Three is the last one.

ZOÉ

How do you know?

SOPHIE

It's my job. I work in debt collection, at a bank. The first registered letter is polite. The second is firm. The third is a date.

ZOÉ

What date?

SOPHIE

I don't know, she hasn't opened it. She never opens anything. She used to put my school reports in the till drawer without reading them.

ZOÉ

Under the banknotes.

SOPHIE

Under the banknotes.

(Sophie sits down next to Zoé.)

ZOÉ

And you? Five suitcases, for an inspection?

SOPHIE

I resigned. On Monday. Fifteen years at the same bank. I gave up my flat. Everything's in the car.

ZOÉ

Why?

SOPHIE

All day long I ring people who owe money. They tell me their lives: the sick husband, the leaking roof, the shop that's stopped making money. And at the end I say: by the fifteenth at the latest. On Monday a woman said to me: you've got the same voice as my daughter. I hung up, took my coat and left. That evening, Irène's letter was in my letterbox.

ZOÉ

You want to come back here.

SOPHIE

I want to take over the hotel. With her.

ZOÉ

Have you told her?

SOPHIE

All my life she's told me: go. Don't end up like me, don't get stuck in a station hotel changing sheets. So I went. I don't know how you tell her you're coming back.

ZOÉ

I won't say a thing. About your suitcases.

SOPHIE

I won't say a thing. About your toaster.

(They shake hands. Dull thuds in the pipes.)

SOPHIE

Who's banging away downstairs?

ZOÉ

The heating engineer.

SOPHIE

At half past midnight?

ZOÉ

He's an enthusiast.

SOPHIE

My mother can't afford a heating engineer in the daytime. Let alone at night...

ZOÉ

He arrived this evening. He says he's an ordinary guest, but he's got a toolbox.

SOPHIE

And in number 6?

ZOÉ

The inspection.

SOPHIE

Already?

ZOÉ

Incognito. Don't say anything. I put Madame Irène's geranium on the bedside table.

SOPHIE

You think a geranium counts?

ZOÉ

Everything counts. Go to bed. The sofa in the lounge has a broken spring, you have to sleep on the left-hand side.

SOPHIE

I know. I'm the one who broke it. In 1998.

(Sophie goes back down. Zoé picks up her things, hesitates, and leaves the toaster at the foot of the little staircase. She goes back up to number 12.)

SCENE 2

(The door of number 6 opens. Charlie comes out in pyjamas, notebook in hand. The thuds in the pipes start again, louder.)

CHARLIE

This is impossible.

(The door of number 7 opens. Irène appears in her nightdress, the necklace round her neck.)

IRÈNE

Is that your radiator or is it you?

CHARLIE

The radiator. Sorry. Did I wake you?

IRÈNE

I don't sleep. At my age, you've done most of your sleeping. You've got a very fine geranium in your room.

CHARLIE

It was already there, on the bedside table. With a little note: "Welcome". Underlined twice.

IRÈNE

It was on my windowsill at nine o'clock.

CHARLIE

Ah. You must have it back.

IRÈNE

Keep it. You look as if you need it more than I do.

(Irène looks Charlie up and down.)

IRÈNE

You're not from the guide.

CHARLIE

Sorry?

IRÈNE

The whole house thinks you're from the guide. The notebook, the tape measure. The girl took my geranium for you. But you're not from the guide.

CHARLIE

How do you know?

IRÈNE

I know.

CHARLIE

Me, from the guide. That's funny. Odette didn't tell me.

IRÈNE

Odette never tells anyone anything. So who are you?

(A pause. Charlie sits down on the chair in the corridor.)

CHARLIE

Can you keep a secret?

IRÈNE

I'm eighty-one. Nobody listens to me. I'm practically a safe.

CHARLIE

I've bought half of the hotel.

(Irène leans against the door frame.)

IRÈNE

Half.

CHARLIE

In June. Odette had put an advert in, very discreet. I answered the same day.

IRÈNE

Odette has sold.

CHARLIE

Half. The other half stays hers. It's in writing.

IRÈNE

And why a station hotel in Vichy, when you come from Paris?

CHARLIE

In February there was a strike. My train stopped here, nothing more until the next day. I crossed the square and rang the bell. Odette gave me number 6. Trains went by all night, the radiator banged, the washbasin sang. And I slept for nine hours. For twelve years I'd been sleeping four. I worked on the thirty-second floor of a tower block, I checked my emails at three in the morning. Here, I slept. The next day I took the train back to Paris, and the week after that, I handed in my notice.

IRÈNE

Because you'd had a good night's sleep.

CHARLIE

Because I wanted it to happen again.

IRÈNE

And what are you going to do with it, your half?

(Charlie opens the notebook.)

CHARLIE

Everything. We take up the carpet, we open the lobby onto the lounge, we get rid of the doilies...

IRÈNE

The doilies.

CHARLIE

We change the name. "Hôtel de la Gare" is gloomy. Just "La Gare". And number 7, the big one, we turn it into a suite. With a bathtub in the middle.

IRÈNE

Number 7 is mine.

CHARLIE

You're the lady with the necklace.

IRÈNE

Since 1979. In that room I have survived three wallpapers, one flood and one husband. I shall survive a bathtub.

CHARLIE

We'll find you another room. Just as nice.

IRÈNE

I shall have number 7.

CHARLIE

And if number 7 isn't for rent anymore?

IRÈNE

Then I'll buy it. Half of number 7 must be for sale somewhere. Which is your half? The bed or the washbasin?

(The thuds in the pipes stop dead. Silence.)

CHARLIE

It's stopped.

IRÈNE

Your heating engineer is very good.

CHARLIE

He wants to keep the old boiler. He's mad.

IRÈNE

Listen. The radiator's stopped banging, the trains are going by, the washbasin is singing. Go to bed. You might sleep for nine hours.

CHARLIE

And you won't say anything? About the half?

IRÈNE

I'm a safe.

(Charlie goes back into number 6. Irène stays alone in the corridor.)

IRÈNE

Odette, Odette. What have you done.

(She goes back into number 7.)

SCENE 3

(Victor comes up the stairs from the lobby, toolbox in hand, his bathrobe black with soot, his face too. He is humming. Sophie comes up behind him, a towel over her arm.)

VICTOR

She's running! She coughed, she spluttered, and she's running! Nineteen seventy-four, and she's running!

SOPHIE

Who?

VICTOR

The boiler.

SOPHIE

You talk about the boiler as if she were a woman.

VICTOR

She's an Italian boiler. She's got character. You have to talk to her gently and hit her in the right place.

SOPHIE

Zoé told me to give you a towel.

(She hands him the towel. He wipes his hands; it makes no difference.)

VICTOR

Thank you. Are you a guest?

SOPHIE

I'm the daughter.

VICTOR

Odette's daughter? Sophie?

SOPHIE

She's told you about me?

VICTOR

Never. Not once, since March. That's how I knew you mattered.

(He holds out his hand. She shakes it. She looks at her hand, black.)

SOPHIE

You're a heating engineer in Vichy?

VICTOR

In Saint-Étienne. Retired. I sold the business in the spring. Twelve vans. Now all I've got left is this box.

SOPHIE

And you've come all the way from Saint-Étienne to fix my mother's boiler, at midnight, in a bathrobe.

VICTOR

Your mother and I have plans.

SOPHIE

What plans?

VICTOR

I can't say. I promised. We signed something, in the spring. Not before the inspection, she said. Not a word.

SOPHIE

Signed what?

VICTOR

A commitment. I'm going to live here. With her. Well, not with her, next to her. In the hotel. Every day.

(The door of number 6 opens a crack. Charlie's face appears in the gap, listens, disappears. The door closes without a sound. Sophie sits down on the chair in the corridor.)

SOPHIE

My mother.

VICTOR

Your mother.

SOPHIE

She's sixty-eight.

VICTOR

She looks sixty-seven.

SOPHIE

And she didn't tell me.

VICTOR

She never tells you anything. You just said so.

SOPHIE

I didn't say anything.

VICTOR

No, that was me. Sorry. I say too much when I'm happy, and tonight I'm very happy. She's running.

SOPHIE

And how did you meet her?

VICTOR

Through a small ad.

SOPHIE

My mother put a small ad in the paper.

VICTOR

Very discreet. But I knew this hotel. I spent my wedding night here. October 1996. Number 7. The wallpaper with the blue birds. My wife and I didn't sleep all night, because of the trains. Well, partly because of the trains.

SOPHIE

The blue birds.

VICTOR

You know them?

SOPHIE

Are you sure it was number 7?

VICTOR

You don't get your wedding night wrong.

SOPHIE

No. You don't get it wrong.

VICTOR

My wife left last year. With a driving instructor. So when I saw the ad, I said to myself: the only place I was ever happy without knowing it is a station hotel in Vichy. I might as well go back and know it this time.

SOPHIE

Someone walked out on me too.

VICTOR

Your husband?

SOPHIE

Me. I walked out on everything. On Monday.

VICTOR

Ah.

SOPHIE

Don't say anything to my mother.

VICTOR

I never say anything.

SOPHIE

You've just told me everything.

VICTOR

That's true. But this time I won't say anything, because you haven't

told me anything. You haven't told me what you do for a living.

SOPHIE

I worked at a bank. In debt collection. When people don't pay, I'm the one who rings them.

VICTOR

That must be hard.

SOPHIE

For them.

VICTOR

For you too. Otherwise you wouldn't have five suitcases.

SOPHIE

How do you know about the suitcases?

VICTOR

I saw your car from the cellar. There's a little window at street level. You can see the tyres. Your car is sitting very low.

(Sophie laughs. With the tip of his finger, Victor wipes a smudge of soot off her cheek and leaves a bigger one.)

VICTOR

Sorry. That's worse.

SCENE 4

(Odette comes up the stairs in her dressing gown, a torch in her hand. She sees Victor and Sophie side by side. She stops on the top step.)

ODETTE

Sophie.

SOPHIE

Mum.

ODETTE

You've got soot on your cheek.

SOPHIE

That's Victor.

ODETTE

You know each other?

SOPHIE

For ten minutes. Mum, you could have told me. About Victor.

(Odette looks at Victor. Behind Sophie's back, Victor makes frantic gestures of denial.)

ODETTE

Told you what?

SOPHIE

That you're going to live together. Here.

(A pause. Victor freezes, one arm in the air.)

ODETTE

Ah.

SOPHIE

He didn't tell me much. He promised. But I worked it out. A commitment, in the spring, he lives here, with you, every day.

ODETTE

Well, yes. There you are. That's it. Victor and me.

VICTOR

Victor and you.

ODETTE

We wanted to tell you after the inspection.

SOPHIE

Since when?

ODETTE

March.

VICTOR

The fourteenth.

ODETTE

The fourteenth.

SOPHIE

And you've got him fixing the boiler on the night you're reunited?

ODETTE

It's his way of showing love.

VICTOR

It's true, I do love a boiler.

SOPHIE

And it didn't occur to you that I'd like to know? That my mother has someone? That someone is moving into my home?

ODETTE

Your home is in Lyon.

SOPHIE

No. Not anymore.

ODETTE

What do you mean, not anymore?

SOPHIE

I mean that... in Lyon it's a flat. Here, it's a home. It's not the same.

ODETTE

It's a hotel.

SOPHIE

Same thing. Kiss, then.

ODETTE

I beg your pardon?

SOPHIE

You're engaged, so kiss. I've never seen you kiss anyone, Mum. I want to see.

(A pause. Victor steps forward, takes Odette's hand and plants a very careful kiss on it. The door of number 6 opens. Charlie appears, in pyjamas.)

CHARLIE

You're kissing the heating engineer?

SOPHIE

The heating engineer?

ODETTE

He's both.

CHARLIE

Both what?

ODETTE

Heating engineer and fiancé. You can be both. Lots of heating engineers are engaged. Most of them, in fact.

VICTOR

It's a job where you meet a lot of people.

CHARLIE

Odette, you never told me you had someone. That changes things, for our arrangement.

SOPHIE

What arrangement?

CHARLIE

And you are?

SOPHIE

Her daughter.

CHARLIE

Ah. Nothing. An arrangement about breakfast. The times. The orange juice.

(Sophie leans towards Odette.)

SOPHIE

Is that the inspection?

ODETTE

Yes.

SOPHIE

Sorry. I didn't realise. Good evening. Welcome. The orange juice is squeezed on the premises. By Zoé.

CHARLIE

So I've heard.

VICTOR

Don't talk about the hotel. Whatever you do.

SOPHIE

Why not?

VICTOR

The file.

CHARLIE

What file?

VICTOR

The boiler file. I'm putting a file together. For the quote.

CHARLIE

Don't bother with a file. We're replacing it.

VICTOR

We are not replacing it. I've only just brought her back to life.

CHARLIE

It's not up to a heating engineer to decide.

VICTOR

It's not up to people passing through to decide.

CHARLIE

Passing through?

ODETTE

Everybody to bed. It's one in the morning, and tomorrow we have a guide.

SOPHIE

Victor, where are you sleeping?

VICTOR

In number 5.

SOPHIE

Not with Mum?

ODETTE

We're old-fashioned.

VICTOR

Very old-fashioned.

(Charlie goes back into number 6 and slams the door. Sophie goes back down to the lobby, watching her mother. Victor opens the door of number 5 and turns round.)

VICTOR

Odette. So, now, should I...

ODETTE

No.

(Victor goes into number 5. Odette is left alone in the corridor. She switches her torch off, on again, off.)

ODETTE

Engaged. At my age. To a heating engineer.

(She goes down.)

SCENE 5

(The corridor. Odette comes back up the stairs, Victor's bottle of champagne in one hand, two tooth mugs in the other. She knocks softly at number 7.)

ODETTE

Irène. Are you asleep?

(The door opens at once. Irène, in her nightdress, wearing the necklace.)

IRÈNE

I never sleep. You know that.

ODETTE

I've got a bottle.

IRÈNE

At one in the morning?

ODETTE

It was for the star. We won't get a star, it's a little guide. We might as well drink it now.

(Irène comes out and sits on the chair in the corridor. Odette sits on a step of the little staircase. She wraps the bottle in the hem of her dressing gown and opens it. A muffled pop.)

ODETTE

So as not to wake Stuttgart.

IRÈNE

What are we drinking to?

ODETTE

My engagement.

IRÈNE

The heating engineer.

ODETTE

You already know.

IRÈNE

The walls are thin. I've known everything that goes on in this corridor since 1979. I know the girl sleeps under the roof, that your daughter has five suitcases, that your fiancé spent his wedding night here with somebody else, and that the person in number 6 has a notebook.

ODETTE

Is that all?

IRÈNE

Is that all you want me to know?

(Odette fills the two tooth mugs. They drink.)

ODETTE

Irène. If one day the hotel wasn't mine anymore, would you still come?

IRÈNE

That depends who it belonged to.

ODETTE

Nice people. People who'd love it. Who'd want to change the carpet.

IRÈNE

Then no.

ODETTE

That's what I thought.

(A pause. A train goes by.)

ODETTE

I came here at twenty-one, with Gérard and one suitcase. The same year as you. The bell was already here. I've changed sheets for forty-seven years. I worked it out once: a hundred thousand sheets, more or less. I've never slept anywhere else. Not one night. When Sophie was born, I came home from the maternity ward the same evening, because there was a conference of notaries and they all wanted number 1. I don't know how to do anything else, Irène. I don't know how to go to the cinema on a Tuesday. I don't know how to make a cake for fewer than thirty people. If they take the hotel away from me, I become an old lady in Vichy. There are already plenty of those.

IRÈNE

Thank you.

ODETTE

You're different. You're a guest.

IRÈNE

Forty-seven years a guest, Odette. We could drop the formalities.

ODETTE

Not in front of the guests.

IRÈNE

There aren't any guests. It's one in the morning.

ODETTE

Then at one in the morning, yes.

(They clink glasses.)

IRÈNE

Odette, dear. I have something to tell you.

ODETTE

So have I.

(A pause. They look at each other.)

IRÈNE

After the inspection.

ODETTE

After the inspection.

(They drink. Odette gets up and picks up the bottle.)

ODETTE

I have to move number 6 to another room. Number 6 and number 5, with the bathroom in between, it won't do. Tomorrow at six, number 6 moves to number 1.

IRÈNE

You'd be better off doing it now.

ODETTE

You don't move an inspection at one in the morning.

IRÈNE

No. Of course not.

ODETTE

And at six we take the boxes from the lounge up to number 12. All of

them. That way, tomorrow, the guide won't see a thing.

IRÈNE

Why are you saying it so loudly?

ODETTE

So I'll remember.

(Odette goes down with the bottle. Irène looks at the little staircase, then goes back into number 7.)

SCENE 6

(The corridor, a little later. Zoé comes down the little staircase from number 12 backwards, the accordion on her back, dragging a rolled-up mattress that catches on every step. She trips over the toaster. The door of number 7 opens.)

IRÈNE

Moving out, Zoé?

ZOÉ

Did you hear Madame Odette? The boxes up to 12, at six o'clock. She said it right under my floor. So 12 has to be empty. So I have to be gone.

IRÈNE

Give me that.

(Irène takes the toaster.)

ZOÉ

You know. About number 12.

IRÈNE

I've known since April. You play the same waltz every night, at eleven. I fall asleep to it. The day you leave, I'll never sleep again.

ZOÉ

I'm not leaving. I'm just coming down a floor.

IRÈNE

Put everything in my room. Against the wardrobe, there's space. That's where my husband's suitcases used to be, I gave them away in 1994. Very nearly with my husband in them.

(Zoé pushes the mattress into number 7. It unrolls in the doorway. She keeps the accordion.)

ZOÉ

Thank you. Tomorrow I'll take it all back. Tomorrow night, after the inspection.

IRÈNE

And what if tomorrow nobody came?

ZOÉ

The inspection is already here. In number 6.

IRÈNE

Zoé, the person in number 6 isn't from the guide.

ZOÉ

Yes, they are. The notebook. The tape measure. The questions about the towels.

IRÈNE

You can measure a door without being from the guide.

ZOÉ

Not at nine o'clock at night.

IRÈNE

And if I told you that the guide...

(She stops.)

ZOÉ

That the guide what?

IRÈNE

That the guide isn't worth getting yourself into such a state.

ZOÉ

It is. It's worth it. Madame Irène, do you know how many little hotels there are in that guide, for the whole country? Two hundred. If we're in it, people come. If people come, we pay the bank. If we pay the bank, Madame Odette keeps the hotel. And if she keeps the hotel, I keep number 12, and you keep number 7, and the boiler gentleman can keep his boiler for all I care. Everything hangs on that. On a little coffee pot in a guidebook.

IRÈNE

Not everything hangs on a coffee pot.

ZOÉ

Here it does. Here everything hangs on little things. On a bucket under a leak. On sticky tape on the key board. On you tapping out the rhythm

on the ceiling.

(A pause.)

IRÈNE

Do you know what I did in September?

ZOÉ

You went to Paris.

IRÈNE

I sold my flat. The big one, on the boulevard Voltaire. Sixty-two years I lived there. I gave away the furniture. I kept the necklace.

ZOÉ

Why?

IRÈNE

Because I wanted to live here. Not three weeks a year. All the time. Like you, in number 12. But paying.

ZOÉ

Have you told Madame Odette?

IRÈNE

I wanted to tell her after the inspection.

ZOÉ

Everybody wants to say something after the inspection.

IRÈNE

Yes. Which is exactly why...

(The bathroom door opens. Victor comes out, a towel on his head, and goes into number 5 without seeing them. The door slams.)

ZOÉ

Which is exactly why what?

IRÈNE

Nothing. Go to sleep. You've got a bell to polish tomorrow.

ZOÉ

Where do I sleep?

IRÈNE

In the lounge. Sophie's already on the sofa, but there's the armchair. That's got a spring too. You sleep on the right-hand side.

(Zoé goes down the stairs with her accordion. Irène looks at the empty corridor.)

IRÈNE

After the inspection.

(She goes back into number 7.)

SCENE 7

(The corridor, still night. The door of number 6 opens. Charlie comes out with a toilet bag and heads for the bathroom. At the same moment the door of number 5 opens. Victor comes out in clean pyjamas, a toothbrush in his hand. They reach the bathroom door together.)

VICTOR

Ah.

CHARLIE

Ah.

VICTOR

After you.

CHARLIE

No, after you.

VICTOR

I insist. Guests first.

CHARLIE

You're a guest too, aren't you? A heating engineer guest.

VICTOR

Yes, but you're different. You count.

(A pause. Through the half-open door, Charlie turns on the washbasin tap. A high-pitched whistle.)

CHARLIE

It sings.

VICTOR

It's always sung. If I fix it, it won't sing anymore.

CHARLIE

Then don't fix it.

VICTOR

You see! You love it the way it is too. You ought to put that in your report: "the washbasin sings".

CHARLIE

My report?

VICTOR

Your expense report. For the train. You could write that the welcome was good. That we did our very best.

CHARLIE

You did a lot. There's a geranium in my room, embroidered sheets, and a questionnaire under the door. With boxes to tick.

VICTOR

What did you tick?

CHARLIE

I haven't finished yet. It's four pages long.

VICTOR

The hot water works now. I fixed it. In 5 and in 6. You can make a note of that.

CHARLIE

Thank you. Noted. Send me the invoice.

VICTOR

No invoice. I'm not going to send myself an invoice.

CHARLIE

Yourself?

VICTOR

Figure of speech. For my own hotel, I don't do invoices.

CHARLIE

Your own hotel?

VICTOR

Well, that's a figure of speech too.

CHARLIE

Listen. If you're Odette's fiancé, fine, good for her. But the hotel is Odette. And me.

VICTOR

You?

CHARLIE

And me.

VICTOR

No, the hotel is Odette and me. Half and half. That's why we're not supposed to talk about it. Because of the guide. You see, now that you're here, I'm telling you because you'll find out anyway, you're in the trade: we didn't want it to affect your report.

CHARLIE

What report?

VICTOR

Your report. For the guide.

CHARLIE

I'm not from the guide.

VICTOR

Yes, you are.

CHARLIE

No. Half of this hotel is mine.

VICTOR

So is mine.

(A pause. A train goes by in the distance.)

CHARLIE

Since when?

VICTOR

The fourteenth of March.

CHARLIE

The second of June.

VICTOR

Which half?

CHARLIE

The half. With the other half staying with Odette.

VICTOR

The other half is my half.

CHARLIE

That's not possible.

(Victor rummages in his pyjama pocket and takes out a sheet of paper folded in four.)

VICTOR

I never let it out of my sight. Not even to sleep.

(Charlie opens the notebook and takes out a sheet of paper folded in four.)

CHARLIE

Neither do I.

(They unfold them. They read at the same time.)

VICTOR

"I, the undersigned, Odette Marchal, hereby transfer one half of the Hôtel de la Gare, Vichy..."

CHARLIE

"... for the sum of sixty thousand euros, and retain the other half."

VICTOR

Sixty thousand.

CHARLIE

Sixty thousand.

VICTOR

She retains the other half.

CHARLIE

She retains the other half.

VICTOR

Odette!

(The door of number 7 opens: Irène. Zoé comes running up the stairs from the lobby, the accordion still on her back. Sophie arrives behind her, a blanket round her shoulders.)

ZOÉ

What's going on? Is there a problem with the water?

CHARLIE

There's a problem with the half.

ZOÉ

Don't shout in front of the guide!

VICTOR

There is no guide! That's half the hotel!

ZOÉ

Half the hotel is in number 6?

VICTOR

Half the hotel is in number 5!

CHARLIE

And in number 6.

(Odette comes up the stairs, torch on. She stops. She sees the two sheets of paper. She switches off the torch.)

ODETTE

Ah.

(Sophie takes the two sheets, one in each hand. She reads them quickly, the way you read at the office.)

SOPHIE

March, sixty thousand. June, sixty thousand. Same hotel. Same sentence. Same signature.

(She looks up.)

SOPHIE

Mum. You sold the hotel twice.

ODETTE

Not twice. Two halves.

(Blackout.)

ACT THREE

SCENE 1

(The lobby, Saturday morning, seven o'clock. Light comes in through the glass door. Sophie sits behind the desk with a calculator, bills and bank statements spread out in front of her. Odette, still in her dressing gown, comes out of the kitchen with two cups of coffee.)

ODETTE

It's hot.

SOPHIE

It's Zoé's coffee machine.

ODETTE

She paid for it with her own money. Don't tell her I know.

(She puts a cup down in front of Sophie. Sophie doesn't pick it up.)

SOPHIE

I opened the drawer.

ODETTE

So I see.

SOPHIE

There were eleven letters from the bank, including your three registered ones. Not one of them had been opened.

ODETTE

I knew what was in them.

SOPHIE

And the last registered letter? Yesterday's? Did you know what was in that?

ODETTE

A date.

(Sophie hands her the open letter.)

SOPHIE

Read it.

ODETTE

I haven't got my glasses.

SOPHIE

"Dear Madam, we are pleased to confirm that loan number such-and-such has been repaid in full. Thank you for your loyalty."

(A pause.)

ODETTE

For my loyalty.

SOPHIE

You don't owe them anything, Mum. Not one cent. Not since the tenth of September.

ODETTE

I was frightened to open it.

SOPHIE

You knew you'd paid.

ODETTE

I knew what I'd paid. I didn't know what I owed. With them there's always something extra: interest, penalties, charges on the charges. It was probably all written in the letters. I didn't open them. So I was waiting for the missing figure.

SOPHIE

How much did you pay?

ODETTE

A hundred and twenty thousand. The roof, eight years ago. Your father, two years after that. The lift, the year after. I never caught up. In the spring they said: the whole hotel, by the autumn. So I sold half.

SOPHIE

To Victor.

ODETTE

It wasn't enough. So I sold the other half.

SOPHIE

The other half was yours. The half you were keeping.

ODETTE

I didn't need it. I've got the key.

SOPHIE

Mum, those papers aren't worth anything. You can't sell a hotel on a page torn out of an exercise book. You need a notary. You need deeds. You haven't sold anything at all. You've taken a hundred and twenty thousand euros from two people who think they've bought something.

ODETTE

They have bought something.

SOPHIE

What?

ODETTE

Half a station hotel. That's what they wanted. It's not my fault they both wanted the same half.

SOPHIE

There's a word for what you did. I heard it ten times a week for fifteen years.

ODETTE

I call it holding on.

(A pause. Sophie finally picks up the cup.)

SOPHIE

Why didn't you tell me?

ODETTE

Because you'd left. It was good that you'd left. You had a life. A bank. A wool coat. I saw you once, in Lyon, on the platform, in your coat, you didn't see me. You were walking fast. I said to myself: there. She walks fast. She has no sheets to change. I wasn't going to ring you up and say: come back, the roof's leaking.

SOPHIE

I've resigned.

ODETTE

What?

SOPHIE

On Monday. I gave up the flat. The five suitcases are everything I own. I didn't come for the inspection, I came to stay.

ODETTE

Stay where?

SOPHIE

Here. I wanted to take over the hotel. With you.

ODETTE

There's nothing left to take over. You've come back to a hotel I've sold twice.

SOPHIE

That you haven't sold to anyone.

ODETTE

That's worse.

SOPHIE

That's better. It can be fixed.

ODETTE

With what?

SOPHIE

I don't know yet. But my job is getting money out of people who haven't got any. I'll try doing it the other way round.

(A pause.)

SOPHIE

And Victor? The fourteenth of March?

ODETTE

That's the date on the cheque.

(Sophie laughs, her head in her hands. Odette laughs too, a little.)

SOPHIE

You let your daughter believe you were engaged.

ODETTE

You looked so happy. I hadn't seen you happy since 1998.

SOPHIE

The spring in the sofa.

ODETTE

The boy from Clermont.

SCENE 2

(Victor comes down the stairs, his suitcase and his toolbox in his hands. Charlie comes down behind with the small suitcase and the notebook. They stop at the bottom of the stairs, side by side, without looking at each other.)

VICTOR

Odette.

CHARLIE

Odette.

ODETTE

The coffee's hot.

VICTOR

I don't want any coffee.

CHARLIE

Nor do I.

(A pause.)

CHARLIE

Well, a little.

(Odette pours a cup for Charlie.)

VICTOR

All right, me too.

(She pours one for Victor.)

VICTOR

We want our money.

CHARLIE

We talked, last night. In the bathroom. For two hours.

VICTOR

Sitting on the edge of the bath.

CHARLIE

We don't agree on anything, except that.

SOPHIE

Your money is at the bank. The bank was paid off on the tenth of September. Banks never give anything back, I'm in a good position to know.

VICTOR

Then we take her to court.

SOPHIE

You can. It'll take three years. The hotel will be sold at auction to pay you back, and at auction things go for half price. You'll each get thirty thousand back, maybe. In three years. And my mother will be sleeping on somebody's sofa.

CHARLIE

That's not our problem.

SOPHIE

No. It's arithmetic.

VICTOR

And the other way?

SOPHIE

We do things properly. At a notary's. You each paid sixty thousand, you each get one half, and my mother gets nothing at all.

ODETTE

I've got the key.

SOPHIE

Mum.

VICTOR

Half each. With this person.

CHARLIE

With this heating engineer.

VICTOR

Who wants to take up the carpet.

CHARLIE

Who wants to keep a boiler from 1974.

VICTOR

A bathtub in the middle of number 7!

CHARLIE

Doilies on the television!

VICTOR

There isn't a television.

CHARLIE

Exactly, there ought to be a television!

ODETTE

No shouting in the lobby. The coach party from Stuttgart is still asleep. Wait. I've got an idea.

SOPHIE

Mum.

ODETTE

Let me finish. Victor, you take downstairs. The cellar, the boiler, the kitchen, the lobby. Charlie, you take upstairs. The bedrooms, the carpet, the bathtub, whatever you like. One half each, but cut the other way. Nobody sets foot in the other one's half.

VICTOR

And the stairs?

ODETTE

The stairs are mine.

CHARLIE

The guests sleep in my half and have breakfast in his?

ODETTE

Like everywhere. They sleep upstairs, they eat downstairs.

VICTOR

The pipes go up.

ODETTE

You follow them. With a pass.

(A pause. Victor and Charlie look at each other.)

CHARLIE

That almost makes sense.

VICTOR

Almost, yes.

SOPHIE

Mum. It's still two halves, and still nothing for you. You've just sold the hotel a third time. And the money is still at the bank.

ODETTE

But not the same way up.

SOPHIE

It makes no difference.

ODETTE

It almost worked.

VICTOR

Almost. Odette, you passed me off as your fiancé in front of your daughter.

ODETTE

You started it. I just followed.

VICTOR

And as the heating engineer, in front of this person.

CHARLIE

And I was passed off as the guide. I was given a geranium.

ODETTE

That was Zoé.

CHARLIE

I had oranges squeezed for me. Embroidered sheets. All night long there was somebody listening at my door.

SOPHIE

Nobody was listening at your door.

CHARLIE

Somebody slipped a guest satisfaction questionnaire under my door at midnight. Four pages.

ODETTE

That was Zoé too.

(A pause. Victor puts down his suitcase.)

VICTOR

And the inspection?

SOPHIE

What about the inspection?

VICTOR

It's still happening today. If the hotel gets into the guide, it's worth more. For everyone. For the notary, for the auction, for everything.

CHARLIE

For selling it on.

VICTOR

For keeping it.

SOPHIE

He's right. A hotel in a guide is worth a third more.

CHARLIE

Then we wait.

VICTOR

We wait for the guide to come. Then we sort it all out.

CHARLIE

A truce.

VICTOR

A truce. But you keep your hands off the carpet.

CHARLIE

And you keep your hands off the boiler.

VICTOR

I can't promise that. She's fragile.

SCENE 3

(Sophie steers Odette and Victor towards the lounge with her papers.)

SOPHIE

Victor, come on. We're doing the accounts. Can you count?

VICTOR

In radiators.

(They go out. Charlie stands in the middle of the empty lobby, cup still in hand, opens the notebook, rereads, turns the pages. The lobby clock shows almost nine. Zoé comes down the stairs, the geranium in her arms.)

ZOÉ

I've come to take back the geranium.

CHARLIE

It was doing very nicely up there.

ZOÉ

It's Madame Irène's. And you're not the guide.

CHARLIE

I never said I was.

ZOÉ

You measured the lounge door. At nine o'clock at night.

CHARLIE

You can measure a door without being from the guide.

ZOÉ

That's what Madame Irène said. I didn't believe her. I ironed your sheets at midnight.

CHARLIE

They were beautifully ironed.

ZOÉ

I know.

(She puts the geranium on the desk. A pause.)

ZOÉ

Are you going to take up the carpet?

CHARLIE

I wanted to.

ZOÉ

And open the lobby onto the lounge.

CHARLIE

I wanted to do that too.

ZOÉ

And number 12? What do you want to do with number 12?

CHARLIE

It rains inside, doesn't it? I was thinking of an office. Or a yoga room.

ZOÉ

It doesn't rain anymore. I put a tarpaulin up.

CHARLIE

You did?

ZOÉ

I live there.

(Charlie puts down the cup.)

ZOÉ

Since March. Nobody knows. Well, everybody knows, except Madame Odette. I'm telling you because you'll go up there with your tape measure anyway. You might as well know what you're measuring.

CHARLIE

I didn't know.

ZOÉ

There are lots of things you don't know. The lobby is closed off because in winter the wind from the station blows right in as far as the stairs. If you open it onto the lounge, the people in the lounge will get cold feet. The carpet is there so you can't hear people coming in late. The third stair creaks, and you mustn't fix it, that's how I know someone's coming down at night. The window in number 9, you have to lift it to shut it. The coach party from Stuttgart wants iced tea. Madame Irène wants her tea at half past nine and she drinks it cold. And the washbasin in number 6 sings when you turn the tap halfway. Did you hear

it?

CHARLIE

All night. In February.

ZOÉ

You slept for nine hours. Do you think that was luck? You slept in a room where somebody had taken care of everything. If you take everything out, you'll never sleep again.

(A pause. Charlie looks at the notebook.)

CHARLIE

So what should I keep?

ZOÉ

Everything.

CHARLIE

Everything?

ZOÉ

Except the plant on the stairs. That really is dead.

CHARLIE

I had a feeling.

(Charlie crosses something out in the notebook. Then another line. Then the whole page.)

ZOÉ

The guide's office opens at nine. I'm going to ring them.

CHARLIE

They won't tell you anything. It's incognito.

ZOÉ

I'll insist. I want to know what time. I want the coffee to be hot at the right moment.

(She picks up the hotel phone and dials a number from the laminated letter, which she takes out of her pocket.)

SCENE 4

(Irène comes down the stairs in her Sunday best, the necklace round her neck, a hat on her head. Zoé is on the phone. Charlie, on the step, the notebook open.)

IRÈNE

Good morning. I'm ready. I'm happy. The bed is comfortable, the coffee is hot.

ZOÉ

Yes, good morning. This is the Hôtel de la Gare, in Vichy. I'd like to know what time your inspection is coming today.

(Irène stops on the third stair. It creaks.)

ZOÉ

I know it's incognito. But we got your letter. Dated the twelfth of September. Signed Madame Delorme, Head of Inspections.

(A pause.)

ZOÉ

Nobody by that name? Are you sure? You never send letters? Never? And Vichy, this year... No. I understand. Thank you. No, no problem. Have a nice day too.

(Zoé slowly puts the phone down.)

ZOÉ

They never send letters. They just turn up. They haven't got a Madame Delorme. And they're not coming to Vichy this year.

CHARLIE

So the letter...

ZOÉ

The letter from the guide is a fake.

(Zoé turns to Irène. Irène hasn't moved from the third stair.)

ZOÉ

You knew. You knew number 6 wasn't the guide. You asked me: what if nobody came?

IRÈNE

Yes.

ZOÉ

How did you know?

IRÈNE

Because Delorme was my mother's name.

(Odette, Sophie and Victor come back from the lounge.)

ODETTE

What's going on?

ZOÉ

There's no inspection. There never was one. Madame Irène wrote the letter from the guide.

(Silence.)

ODETTE

Irène.

IRÈNE

I had the letterhead done at the printer's on the rue de Paris. He asked me why. I told him I was eighty-one. He didn't ask anything else.

ODETTE

But why?

IRÈNE

Because I came in April this year, and you'd closed the lounge. You'd stopped changing the bulbs in the corridor. You'd let the plant on the stairs die and you said it was resting. You stopped answering the phone after eight. I've been coming here for forty-seven years, Odette, I know your seasons. That wasn't a season. A woman who isn't expecting anyone anymore lets go. So I gave you someone to expect.

ODETTE

A guide.

IRÈNE

And I wrote to your daughter. "Your mother needs you for the inspection." It was true, apart from the inspection.

SOPHIE

I came.

IRÈNE

You came. And the bulb in the corridor has been changed. And the bell is shining. And the coffee is hot.

ODETTE

You brought two buyers down on my head!

IRÈNE

No. That was you. I brought an inspection. You're the one who wrote to everyone to say it was coming.

(Odette opens her mouth and shuts it again.)

VICTOR

I fixed a boiler for nobody.

CHARLIE

Not for nobody. I slept.

ZOÉ

I ironed embroidered sheets at midnight. I wrote a satisfaction questionnaire. I bought a coffee machine.

IRÈNE

It's a very good coffee machine.

ZOÉ

It cost eighty-nine euros.

SOPHIE

And the extra third? A hotel in a guide is worth a third more. Without the guide, we're back to the arithmetic.

CHARLIE

Then the truce is over.

VICTOR

The truce is over.

(A pause. Nobody moves.)

SCENE 5

(Irène comes down the last few stairs. She opens her handbag, takes out a chequebook and puts it on the desk, next to the geranium.)

IRÈNE

In September, I sold my flat.

ODETTE

On the boulevard Voltaire?

IRÈNE

I didn't want to leave here again. I wanted to tell you after the inspection. I'm telling you now, since it isn't coming. Odette, I'm paying you for number 7. In advance. For the rest of my days.

ODETTE

How much?

IRÈNE

Sixty thousand.

SOPHIE

The price of a half.

IRÈNE

I've done the sums. Twenty years, at three thousand a year. If I live to a hundred and one, you lose.

ODETTE

And if you die next year?

IRÈNE

Then you win, and I won't be there to see it. It suits me either way.

ODETTE

Irène, I can't accept.

IRÈNE

You sold your hotel twice. You can surely let one room once.

(Silence. Sophie picks up the calculator.)

SOPHIE

Sixty thousand. That pays back one half.

(Victor and Charlie look at each other.)

VICTOR

Which one?

CHARLIE

Mine.

VICTOR

Yours?

CHARLIE

I don't want half a hotel. I realised that last night, on the edge of the bath, while you were telling me about the Italian boiler as if she were your fiancée. I don't want to own the carpet. I want to sleep on it. I want to arrive on a Friday evening, ring the bell, and have somebody give me number 6 without asking my opinion on the doilies.

ODETTE

Charlie...

CHARLIE

I'll take the money. And I'm booking number 6. One week a month. At the normal rate.

ODETTE

At the February rate.

CHARLIE

What was it, in February?

ODETTE

It was the strike. I gave you half price.

CHARLIE

Then the February rate.

SOPHIE

Victor?

VICTOR

I'm staying. I gave up my flat in Saint-Étienne, I sold my vans, and that boiler needs someone. I'm keeping my half.

SOPHIE

Monday, the notary. A real one. Victor, one half. Mum, the other.

ODETTE

And you?

SOPHIE

I'm the daughter. I've got the key.

(Odette looks at her. She says nothing. She takes a key from the board and gives it to her.)

ODETTE

Number 4. When the coach party from Stuttgart leaves.

SOPHIE

Number 4. Like when I was ten.

ODETTE

You can repaper it. You were ten when you chose the wallpaper.

IRÈNE

Monsieur Victor.

VICTOR

Madame?

IRÈNE

October 1996. You sang out of tune in the shower. And your wife laughed. All night long I heard the trains and your wife laughing.

VICTOR

You remember us?

IRÈNE

I was next door. In number 7. Number 7 has been mine since 1979, I've told you that already, or Odette has, it's the same thing. You weren't in number 7. You were in number 5.

VICTOR

But the blue birds...

SOPHIE

The blue birds are in number 5. In number 7 it's yellow flowers. Charlie told you so last night.

CHARLIE

Even on the ceiling.

VICTOR

I spent last night in my wedding room.

IRÈNE

And you didn't notice?

VICTOR

The bulb had gone.

ODETTE

It's resting.

VICTOR

I went in in the dark, I went down to the cellar, I came back up black with soot, I had a hot shower. And this morning I packed my case without opening the shutters. I didn't want to see anything more of this hotel. In 1996 there wasn't any hot water either. I didn't even notice, back then. We had other things to do.

IRÈNE

I know. I was next door.

(Victor laughs. Then he sits down on the step next to Charlie.)

ODETTE

Right. There's one thing left. The boxes from the lounge: since the inspection isn't coming, we can still take them up to number 12.

ZOÉ

No.

SOPHIE

No.

IRÈNE

No.

CHARLIE

No.

VICTOR

No. Why are we saying no?

(Odette looks at them, one by one.)

ODETTE

Does everybody know something about number 12 except me?

ZOÉ

I live in number 12. Since March. I haven't got a cousin in Cusset. I haven't got a cousin at all.

(A pause.)

ODETTE

I know.

ZOÉ

You know?

ODETTE

Every morning at ten past seven, the fuses blow. There's only one person in Vichy who makes toast under a leaking roof. And you've been playing the same waltz since April. Off-key, in the same place, every night.

ZOÉ

And you never said anything?

ODETTE

I never say anything. Everybody here knows that.

VICTOR

I'll redo the roof on number 12. On Monday, after the notary.

ZOÉ

I'll pay rent.

ODETTE

You'll pay in waltzes. One a night, for Irène. And you'll learn the bit where you go off-key.

IRÈNE

Don't you dare. That's where I fall asleep.

(Zoé picks up the geranium again. She holds it out to Irène, who pushes it back towards Charlie. Charlie puts it on the step, next to the dead plant.)

VICTOR

Odette. And what about us? The engagement?

ODETTE

We'll talk about it after the inspection.

VICTOR

There is no inspection.

ODETTE

Then we won't talk about it.

(Victor turns towards Sophie. There is still soot on his hand. He looks at it and wipes it on his trousers. Sophie smiles.)

SOPHIE

There's still some. There.

VICTOR

Where?

SOPHIE

Everywhere.

(The doorbell. Everyone freezes. Behind the glass door, a silhouette, a suitcase, a notebook in hand.)

ZOÉ

Madame Irène. You only wrote one letter?

IRÈNE

Only one. I swear on my necklace.

CHARLIE

There's somebody with a notebook.

VICTOR

You can have a notebook without being from the guide.

SOPHIE

Or the other way round.

(Odette straightens the picture. The crack in the wall shows. She puts it back crooked. She tugs her dressing gown straight.)

ODETTE

Zoé.

(Zoé goes behind the desk. The front door opens.)

ZOÉ

Good morning. Welcome to the Hôtel de la Gare.

(Zoé strikes the brass bell. For the first time, it rings true. Blackout.)

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