

Sotto Voce

Mystery · 8-character play · 5 women, 2 men, 1 either · 60 min · Intermediate

On the eve of the regional competition, the Saint-Aubin choir comes back from its break to find that the handwritten mass left to them by Odile, their late conductor, has vanished from the piano. There is no copy, the door has been locked since eight o'clock and nobody has gone out. Eight people in a parish hall, eight good reasons not to empty their pockets, and a conductor who insists on doing the warm-ups whatever happens.

The parish hall in Saint-Aubin, a village in Normandy, on a Friday evening in May, the night before the competition, the present day.

Casting

NINA (Female role, Adult) 44, primary school teacher, has led the choir since Odile died six months ago.

CAMILLE (No gender marker, Adult) thirties, assesses claims for an insurance company, joined the choir three weeks ago.

MARTHE (Female role, Senior) 81, alto, has sung in the choir since 1968.

ROSA (Female role, Senior) 74, soprano, has made the tea and cakes for the break for thirty years.

ELENA (Female role, Adult) 39, the village pharmacist, soprano soloist.

ZOÉ (Female role, Adult) 33, piano teacher, accompanies the choir.

MARCO (Male role, Adult) 52, baker, the only tenor in the choir.

JONAS (Male role, Adult) 47, bass, sexton, keeps the key to the hall.

ACT ONE

SCENE 1: THE RED FOLDER

(A parish hall. A piano, chairs in a semicircle, a table with a teapot and cups. Upstage, the front door. On one side, the kitchen door, with a serving hatch, and right next to it the door to the sacristy; on the other, the corridor to the cloakroom. The clock says nine.)

(Nina claps her hands.)

NINA

Back to work! Cups down, mouths open. The Kyrie, from the top. Zoé, please.

ZOÉ

Whenever you like. Pass me the mass.

NINA

It's on the piano.

ZOÉ

There's nothing on the piano.

NINA

The red folder. On the piano. Next to the metronome.

ZOÉ

There's the metronome.

(Nina goes to the piano. She lifts the metronome and looks underneath.)

MARCO

It's not under the metronome, Nina. It's thirty pages long.

NINA

Who's taken the mass?

(Silence. Rosa gathers up cups.)

ROSA

Anyone for more tea?

NINA

Rosa. Nobody wants tea. Who has taken Odile's mass?

ELENA

Nobody's taken it. You put it down somewhere else.

NINA

I put it there, at a quarter to nine, when I said "break". You all saw me.

MARTHE

I wasn't looking. I was resting my eyes.

JONAS

It can't have gone far. The door's been locked since eight.

CAMILLE

Why locked?

(Everyone turns to Camille.)

MARTHE

It's the rule.

ROSA

Odile's rule.

JONAS

We lock up at eight, we open up at ten. Nobody leaves before the end. Odile used to say a rehearsal is like a plane: you don't get off mid-flight.

CAMILLE

And the key?

JONAS

Right here. It hasn't moved.

CAMILLE

So nobody's gone out.

NINA

So the mass is in this room. So someone in here has hidden it.

(Whispers run from chair to chair.)

NINA

No whispering! Not even sotto voce!

ZOÉ

Or it's fallen down behind the piano.

(Jonas and Marco pull the piano away from the wall. It creaks. They look behind it.)

MARCO

A pencil. A throat sweet. A programme from 2009.

JONAS

No mass.

NINA

Tomorrow at seven, I hand it in at the town hall so they can copy it for the jury. No score, no "new work" category. No category, and we're singing our same old drinking songs in front of three hundred people.

ROSA

And coming eleventh.

MARTHE

Out of twelve. Since 1991.

JONAS

Twelfth is the care home. They've got an excuse.

NINA

This year we have a mass nobody has ever heard. Odile's last. For once in our lives, we have a chance.

ELENA

You didn't make a single copy?

MARTHE

One does not photocopy Odile.

NINA

She wrote it on the first page. "Not for photocopying. For learning." Everyone copied out their own part by hand, and that's it.

MARCO

In erasable pen, like everything else. Maybe she changed her mind.

MARTHE

The pens came from me. Every Christmas, a box of twelve. She corrected everything. A note, a rest, a dynamic. She rubbed out more than she wrote.

ROSA

And in the margins she wrote little things. We never knew what. She rubbed them out before we arrived.

MARTHE

Her asides. Sotto voce.

ZOÉ

And the accompaniment only exists in there. I don't know it by heart.
Thirty pages of piano.

*(Marco has taken his part out of his pocket. He studies it closely.
Elena, passing by, turns it the right way up for him.)*

MARCO

Thanks.

CAMILLE

Can I suggest something?

JONAS

Three weeks you've been here, and you're suggesting.

CAMILLE

In my line of work, when something goes missing, you start from the last moment anyone saw it. And you reconstruct. Minute by minute. Who was where.

ELENA

And what is your line of work?

CAMILLE

I assess claims, for an insurance company. Water damage, mostly.
Burglaries, sometimes. People who swear the ring was in the sugar bowl.

ZOÉ

And was it?

CAMILLE

Half the time, it was in the tea caddy.

NINA

Fine. We reconstruct. But we don't lose our voices.

(Nina takes a kitchen timer out of her bag. She winds it up.)

NINA

Every ten minutes, this timer goes off and we do a warm-up.
Investigation or no investigation, tomorrow we sing.

ZOÉ

You're serious.

NINA

The jury won't ask whether we found the mass. They'll hear whether we're in tune.

(She puts the timer on the piano. Tick, tick, tick.)

SCENE 2: WHERE WERE YOU

(Camille takes a chair, turns it round and sits astride it, facing the group.)

CAMILLE

Nina puts the folder down at a quarter to nine. Did anyone see it after that?

ROSA

Me. At ten to nine. I put the sugar bowl down next to it.

NINA

On the piano? We don't put anything on the piano.

ROSA

The sugar bowl isn't anything, it's sugar.

CAMILLE

So between ten to nine and nine. Ten minutes. Rosa, during those ten minutes?

ROSA

I was pouring. Facing the back wall, as always, the kettle's plugged in over there. I never leave my teapot during the break. If I leave it, Marthe helps herself to seconds.

MARTHE

Once. In 1997.

CAMILLE

I can vouch for Rosa. I was right beside her, with my back to the room, she was showing me her shortbread. I had three cups.

JONAS

So that's one alibi for two people.

CAMILLE

That's two alibis for one place. Let's keep going. Marthe?

MARTHE

In my armchair. As I have been every break since 1968.

ELENA

You were asleep.

MARTHE

I was resting my eyes. When I sleep, I snore. Did anybody hear me snore?

(Nobody answers.)

MARTHE

There you are.

CAMILLE

Zoé?

ZOÉ

In the cloakroom. On the phone.

CAMILLE

To whom?

ZOÉ

Nobody.

CAMILLE

On the phone to nobody.

ZOÉ

To my mother. She wanted to know if I'd eaten.

ROSA

And had you?

ZOÉ

Rosa.

ROSA

It's a real question. There's shortbread left.

CAMILLE

Elena?

ELENA

In the toilets.

CAMILLE

For ten minutes?

ELENA

I wash my hands for a long time. I'm a pharmacist.

CAMILLE

Jonas?

JONAS

With the boiler. It's been making a noise since Tuesday, I went to listen.

CAMILLE

And was it making the noise?

JONAS

No. It never does when you're listening.

CAMILLE

Marco?

MARCO

Me? At the window. Watching the rain.

ROSA

It's not raining.

MARCO

Watching to see if it would rain. For tomorrow. The coach.

CAMILLE

And Nina?

NINA

In the corridor, on the phone to the coach company, as it happens. For tomorrow, half past seven, outside the church. Do you want to see my call log?

CAMILLE

Yes.

(Nina hands over her phone. Camille looks at it and gives it back.)

CAMILLE

Nine minutes with "Lebrun Coaches".

NINA

They have hold music. I heard eight minutes of it.

CAMILLE

According to all of you, nobody was at the piano. Nobody saw anyone at the piano. And the mass isn't on it any more.

JONAS

A ghost.

MARTHE

Odile would be quite capable of coming back for it. She never did like lending her things.

(Rosa gets up and takes a tray covered with a tea towel from the table.)

ROSA

Right. While you all suspect each other, I'm putting Marco's turnovers in the oven. He brought twenty, they won't eat themselves.

MARCO

No!

(Everyone looks at him.)

MARCO

They're better cold.

ROSA

A cold turnover is a sad turnover. You're a baker, you ought to know that.

MARCO

Exactly. I'm a baker. I do know.

JONAS

The oven hasn't worked properly since the church fête anyway. All it does now is keep things warm. Sixty degrees, not one more. I asked the town hall for an engineer in October. The freezer down in the cellar, on the other hand, works too well: it's still got the ice lollies from June in it, and a leg of lamb belonging to the priest.

ROSA

Keeping warm is all I ask of it.

(Rosa goes out to the kitchen. We hear the oven door: a long creak.)

ROSA

This oven creaks like a castle door!

(Marco slowly sits down.)

ELENA

Are you all right, Marco?

MARCO

Fine. I like cold turnovers, that's all. It's an opinion.

(The timer rings. Nina stops it.)

NINA

Warm-up. The siren, on "oo". From the bottom of your range to the top, and back down. On your feet.

(Everyone stands, except Marthe. They do the siren, going up. Camille carries on questioning over the top of it.)

CAMILLE

Zoé, does your mother often ring you during rehearsals?

ZOÉ

Ooo... Every rehearsal. Ooo...

CAMILLE

For nine minutes?

ZOÉ

She has hold music too.

NINA

No talking during the siren!

(The siren comes back down. Rosa returns, wiping her hands.)

ROSA

Twenty minutes and they'll be perfect.

(Zoé's phone vibrates in her pocket. She switches it off without looking at it.)

SCENE 3: MOTIVES

CAMILLE

We're looking in the wrong place. Let's stop asking where everyone was. Let's ask who had a reason.

(A silence. Nobody looks at anybody.)

ELENA

Last night, when we were stacking the chairs, Zoé said: "If that manuscript disappeared, we might finally sing something decent."

ZOÉ

Thank you, Elena.

ELENA

You said it. I heard it. So did Rosa.

ROSA

I heard "manuscript". After that I heard the kettle.

ZOÉ

Yes, I said it. And I meant it. It's sweet, this mass. It isn't good. The Gloria climbs for no reason, the Sanctus is the Kyrie in a hat, and the Agnus... Marco, sorry, but you shout it.

MARCO

I don't shout it. I sing it loud.

ZOÉ

I've been playing this since September. And since Odile died, I've carried on because nobody dares say it. The jury will dare. There's a conductor from Rouen on the jury. He's conducted in Vienna. He'll listen to us with the face you make when someone hands you a cake that's gone wrong.

MARTHE

Odile paid for your piano lessons for seven years, my girl.

(A pause.)

ZOÉ

I know.

MARTHE

I only mention it because of the face you make at cakes.

ZOÉ

I haven't touched her mass. And since we're talking about reasons, there's Marthe.

MARTHE

At last. I was waiting my turn.

ROSA

Everybody knows about 1985.

CAMILLE

I don't.

MARTHE

The election for conductor. There were two of us: Odile and me. Odile, ten votes. Me, nine. For forty years, in this village, I have been the one who lost by a single vote. People remind me of it in the bakery.

MARCO

I've never said it.

MARTHE

You think it while you're giving me my change. If I'd wanted revenge on Odile, I'd have taken it while she was alive. Much more fun.

ROSA

And Jonas has the key.

JONAS

I've got the key, so it's me? The priest has the key to the church, nobody accuses him of stealing the mass. And why would I make this mass disappear? Do you know what the basses sing, in this mass? A D. One single D, for forty bars. Everybody else takes off: the sopranos, the altos, the tenor, the piano. And me, I hold the D. We're the ground, us basses. Nobody looks at the ground. Nobody buys a concert ticket for the ground. But take the ground away, and see how well the sopranos fly then.

(Elena looks at him. He looks away.)

ELENA

Nobody's saying the basses are useless.

JONAS

Nobody's saying it. Everybody thinks it while they're giving you your change.

MARTHE

He's stolen my line.

ZOÉ

And what about Elena?

ELENA

Me? I've got the solo. Why would I make the mass with my solo in it disappear?

ZOÉ

Because you know the conductor from Rouen. The one on the jury.

(Elena doesn't answer.)

ZOÉ

She auditioned for him, a long time ago. She told me about it one night, after two glasses of cider.

ELENA

Seventeen years ago. I was twenty-two, I wanted to sing. Not at the pharmacy, not on Thursday nights: sing. I took the train to Rouen in a

dress I'd bought for the occasion, I sang a Mozart aria. He let me get all the way to the end, he was very polite. He said: "You have a lovely voice, young lady. For a choir." I came home and took my pharmacy exams. And eight years ago, Odile came in to buy cough syrup and heard me humming behind the counter.

JONAS

And tomorrow you sing the solo in front of him.

ELENA

Tomorrow I sing the solo in front of him. In a choir. He'll have been right. Funny, isn't it?

CAMILLE

That's a reason.

ELENA

That's a reason to feel sick. Not to steal a mass.

NINA

And Marco?

ROSA

Marco?

MARTHE

Marco adores his Agnus. He's got a B, right at the top, that Odile wrote for him.

MARCO

I love my B.

ZOÉ

You miss it one time in two.

MARCO

I love it one time in two.

JONAS

There's someone left.

(Everyone turns to Camille.)

JONAS

Three weeks. You join the choir a month before the competition. You don't know anybody, nobody knows you. And the night the mass disappears, you're the one running the investigation.

(The timer rings. Nina stops it.)

NINA

Warm-up. Scale on "mee". Jonas, you can accuse people afterwards.

(They go up the scale, staring at Camille. At the top, Elena stops.)

ELENA

In films, it's always the one running the investigation.

CAMILLE

In films, yes.

ZOÉ

And in real life?

(A pause.)

CAMILLE

In real life, I do have a reason. A real one.

NINA

What reason?

CAMILLE

Odile was my grandmother.

(Silence. Rosa puts the teapot down.)

MARTHE

The son. The son who went off to Canada.

CAMILLE

My father. They'd stopped speaking. I saw her twice in my life, I was six. She made me sing a scale in her kitchen and said: "That's out of tune, but it's brave."

ROSA

That's Odile all over.

CAMILLE

When she died, the solicitor wrote to my father. Her scores, everything else: it all goes to the family. My father didn't want any of it. So it's me. This mass belongs to me. I don't need to steal it.

ZOÉ

Or you want to take it back before we sing it without you.

CAMILLE

I'm singing it with you. Badly, but I'm singing it.

NINA

Why didn't you tell us?

CAMILLE

Because around here, all anyone talks about is her. I wanted to hear how you talk about her when I'm not in the room.

MARTHE

So that's it. You sing out of tune exactly the way she did. On the "ee"s.

SCENE 4: TUESDAYS

NINA

Right. Bags.

ELENA

Sorry?

NINA

Everyone empties their bag on the table. Thirty pages won't fit in a pocket.

MARTHE

At my age, a handbag is a diary.

CAMILLE

Everyone empties their own, nobody touches anyone else's. That way, no arguments.

(One by one, they empty their bags onto the table. Camille takes notes in a notebook.)

CAMILLE

Jonas. A bunch of keys, a screwdriver, a packet of tissues. Elena.

ELENA

Lozenges. Paracetamol. A throat spray. Plasters. Another throat spray.

JONAS

You've got the whole pharmacy in there.

ELENA

Tomorrow, when you've lost your voice, you'll be glad I've got the whole pharmacy in here.

CAMILLE

Marthe.

MARTHE

My knitting. My glasses. My other glasses. And a little bottle.

ROSA

Marthe!

MARTHE

It's for the voice. A drop before the Agnus. Odile used to take two.

CAMILLE

Zoé.

(Zoé empties her bag, but holds on to a large envelope, which she keeps pressed against her.)

CAMILLE

The envelope too.

ZOÉ

It's three millimetres thick. A thirty-page mass won't fit in it.

CAMILLE

All the same.

ZOÉ

It's personal.

MARTHE

Everything's personal tonight. Show us your envelope, I showed you my bottle.

(Zoé holds up the envelope, shows how thin it is, and puts it back in her bag.)

ZOÉ

There. No mass.

CAMILLE

Nina.

NINA

My keys, some exercise books to mark, a tuning fork.

(She empties her bag. A sheaf of sheet music slides out across the table. Jonas picks one up.)

JONAS

"Gospel. Arranged for mixed choir." Nina?

NINA

I always carry them. Just in case.

ELENA

In case the mass disappeared?

NINA

In case someone, one day, asked me what I'd like to sing.

JONAS

You asked, in January. We voted for the mass, unanimously, minus one vote.

NINA

Minus mine. It was my first decision as conductor, and I lost it. Put them away.

CAMILLE

Marco.

MARCO

I haven't got a bag.

CAMILLE

Pockets, then.

(Marco empties his pockets: his keys, his part folded in four, and a little flour that falls onto the table.)

MARCO

Flour. There's always some. Even on Sundays.

CAMILLE

And me.

(Camille empties a bag: a tape measure, a notebook of claim reports, an envelope.)

MARTHE

Another envelope.

CAMILLE

The solicitor's letter. I've had it on me for three weeks. Just in case.

ROSA

In case of what?

CAMILLE

In case I found the courage to show it to you. In the end, I didn't need

to.

(Camille puts the envelope away and turns to Rosa.)

CAMILLE

Rosa.

ROSA

You'll be disappointed. A purse, a rosary, some shortbread.

(She tips out her shopping bag. A folded programme falls onto the table. Elena picks it up.)

ELENA

"The Villiers Songbirds. Spring Concert."

(She unfolds the programme.)

ELENA

"Sopranos: Anne, Brigitte, Rosa."

(Silence.)

NINA

Rosa?

ROSA

There are lots of Rosas.

JONAS

In Villiers? There's one Rosa. It's you.

MARCO

The Songbirds. Rosa sings with the Songbirds.

NINA

The Villiers Songbirds are on tomorrow, at the competition. Right before us.

ROSA

I know. I'm on the same coach.

ELENA

Since when?

ROSA

Since 1994.

MARTHE

Thirty years. Thirty years you've been singing for the enemy.

ROSA

The enemy? They're pensioners singing Fauré in a village hall. On Tuesdays, there's nothing on here. On Thursdays I sing with you; on Tuesdays, with them. Odile sang at the cathedral on Mondays, and nobody ever called her a spy.

NINA

Did you tell them about the mass?

ROSA

They asked me what we were singing tomorrow. I said: a mass. It's not a secret, it's printed in the competition programme.

ELENA

And did you tell them there was only one copy?

(Rosa doesn't answer straight away.)

ROSA

Maybe. In passing. We were talking about Odile.

CAMILLE

Rosa, during the break, you didn't leave the teapot. I said so, and I stand by it.

JONAS

But Rosa did go into the kitchen just now. Alone.

ROSA

To put turnovers in the oven!

JONAS

All we saw was the tea towel.

ROSA

You think I've got a thirty-page mass stuffed down my blouse? Look at me. There's barely room for the rosary.

MARTHE

The Songbirds. One of our sopranos with the Songbirds. If Odile had known, she'd have died all over again.

ROSA

Odile did know.

(A pause.)

NINA

I'm sorry?

ROSA

Nothing. I'm going to see to my turnovers. At least they don't ask me where I go on Tuesdays.

(The timer rings. Nina slaps it off.)

NINA

Warm-up. The motorboat. Lips together, let them buzz, and follow my hand.

(They all buzz their lips, following Nina's hand as it rises and falls. Rosa too, for a moment, then she stops.)

ROSA

No. You can't accuse me and make me do the motorboat at the same time.

(Rosa goes out to the kitchen.)

SCENE 5: KEEPING WARM

(Those left behind look at each other. From the kitchen, we hear the long creak of the oven.)

MARCO

I'll go and help her.

NINA

You stay here. Nobody goes into the kitchen alone.

MARCO

She's in there alone.

NINA

Exactly.

(A cry from the kitchen. Rosa comes back. In one hand, the tray of turnovers. In the other, a red folder.)

ROSA

It was in the oven.

(Everyone rushes over. Nina takes the folder out of her hands.)

NINA

The mass. Odile's mass.

JONAS

In the oven?

ROSA

Under the rack. Lying flat. I slid my tray in on top of it without looking. Who looks under the rack? Nobody looks under the rack.

ELENA

Is it cooked?

ROSA

The oven only keeps things warm. It's lukewarm. Like the turnovers.

MARTHE

Bring my armchair closer. I want a good look at this.

(Nina clutches the folder to her chest.)

NINA

Thank you. Thank you, Rosa. I'm sorry about before. Sorry about the motorboat.

ROSA

It's nothing. Have a turnover.

ZOÉ

Open it, let's get going. It's a quarter to ten and we haven't sung a bar.

(Nina opens the folder. She looks at the first page. She turns the page. Another. And another.)

NINA

Zoé.

ZOÉ

What?

NINA

Come and look.

(Zoé comes over. She leafs through in turn, faster and faster.)

ZOÉ

There's nothing there.

ELENA

What do you mean, nothing?

ZOÉ

Staves. Empty staves. Five lines, five lines, five lines. Not one note. Not one word. Not even the title.

(Zoé turns the folder upside down. Nothing falls out.)

JONAS

Let me see.

(The folder goes from hand to hand. Everyone leafs through it. Marthe takes a page, holds it at arm's length, then right up against her nose.)

MARTHE

I can't see anything.

ZOÉ

There's nothing to see, Marthe.

MARTHE

No, I mean I can't see a thing. I've got my distance glasses on.

(She hands the page back.)

MARCO

It's warm.

ZOÉ

Everything's warm, Marco, it's just come out of the oven.

MARCO

I'm just saying it's warm.

ELENA

Somebody's swapped it.

JONAS

For brand-new manuscript paper. They took the real one and left this in its place, in the same folder.

NINA

So we'd think we'd found it.

CAMILLE

Can I see the pages?

NINA

No. Nobody touches anything else.

JONAS

Who'd want us searching for it until morning in a locked hall, while the real one is somewhere else?

(Slowly, every eye turns to Rosa.)

ROSA

No.

ELENA

Somewhere else, like Villiers, for instance.

ROSA

And how would I have got it to Villiers? Up the chimney?

JONAS

With your phone. One photo per page, thirty photos. Five minutes' work, in a kitchen.

ROSA

I don't know how to send a photo. I don't even know how to take one, I always get my ear.

ZOÉ

And why hide it in the oven where you were putting your own turnovers?

MARTHE

So that we'd find it along with the turnovers and say to ourselves: she'd never have been that stupid. It's very clever. Too clever for Rosa, as it happens.

ROSA

Thank you, Marthe.

MARTHE

I'm defending you, dear.

MARCO

Nina. There's something I have to tell you.

NINA

What?

(Everyone waits. Marco looks at the red folder.)

MARCO

Tomorrow, I'm not taking the coach. I'm coming in my own car. Because of the bread.

NINA

Marco, nobody cares about the coach.

MARCO

I wanted it said.

NINA

I'm ringing the Songbirds' conductor.

ROSA

Mireille? It's a quarter to ten. Mireille's asleep. She's gone to bed at nine since her hip.

JONAS

We unlock and drive to Villiers. Twenty minutes by car.

NINA

Nobody goes out. If anybody goes out, the real one goes out with them.

ZOÉ

Then that's it. We stop. Tomorrow morning we ring the jury, tell them we've got flu, and that's the end of it.

MARCO

The whole choir? Flu? In May?

ZOÉ

Better than singing drinking songs in front of a man who's conducted in Vienna.

NINA

No.

(Nina closes the folder, puts it on the piano and sets the metronome on top of it.)

NINA

Nobody goes out. Nobody goes to sleep. Nobody has flu. We have until seven, and at seven this mass will be on the mayor's desk with its notes in it.

(A pause. Rosa holds out the tray.)

ROSA

Anyone want a turnover?

(Nobody answers. Marco, alone, takes a turnover. He bites into it.)

MARCO

They're very good, warm.

(Blackout.)

ACT TWO

SCENE 1: THE COFFEE STAIN

(Ten o'clock. Rosa sits apart from the others, on a chair by the kitchen door, the tray of turnovers on her knees. The red folder is on the piano, under the metronome. Elena sprays her throat. Jonas looks at the clock.)

JONAS

Ten o'clock. At ten o'clock I usually unlock.

NINA

Not tonight.

JONAS

I'm only saying that at ten o'clock I usually unlock.

NINA

Rosa. Where's the real one?

(Rosa doesn't answer.)

NINA

Rosa, I'm talking to you.

ROSA

I'm not talking any more. On Tuesdays, I sing. On Fridays, I keep my mouth shut.

MARTHE

This is going to be a long night.

ZOÉ

I'll say it once more, calmly. We stop. We go home. We sleep. Tomorrow we ring the jury.

NINA

And you write it out again. You've been playing it since September.

ZOÉ

Thirty pages of accompaniment, from memory, in one night? I'm not Mozart. I teach piano in Saint-Aubin, I teach scales to children chewing

gum.

NINA

You remember the Kyrie.

ZOÉ

The Kyrie, yes. The start of the Gloria. After that I see black spots and hear Marco shouting.

MARCO

I don't shout.

CAMILLE

Nina, let me look at the pages.

NINA

Nobody touches them.

CAMILLE

Swapped goods are my job. And it belongs to me.

(A pause. Nina lifts the metronome, picks up the folder and hands it to Camille. Camille moves over to the piano lamp and examines the pages one by one.)

CAMILLE

The paper isn't new. It's yellowed at the edges. It smells of cupboard.

MARTHE

Odile bought her manuscript paper at Bertin's, in Caen. Bertin's closed in 2003, she'd stocked up. She still had three reams of it in her garage.

JONAS

So the thief took Odile's paper. From Odile's house.

CAMILLE

Maybe. Wait.

(Camille stops at one page and tilts it towards the lamp.)

CAMILLE

Page three. A round stain. Brown. The bottom of a cup.

(Rosa jumps to her feet, the tray in her hands.)

ROSA

Her cup! She used to put her cup down on the mass! I told her a hundred times: Odile, not on the mass, there's a saucer!

MARTHE

You weren't talking any more.

ROSA

This is an exception.

NINA

The day we did the Gloria. In October, a month before she died. She put her cup down on page three, she swore, she wiped it with her sleeve. I was standing next to her.

CAMILLE

And the stain is right here. On the same page. And look at the corners: every page is worn at the bottom right, where you turn it with your thumb. Every one. Paper that comes out of a garage isn't worn like that. That takes months of rehearsals.

(Camille runs a finger over the corner of the folder and looks at it.)

CAMILLE

And flour. Here, on the corner.

ROSA

There's flour everywhere in that kitchen. It's a kitchen.

MARCO

There you go. It's a kitchen.

ZOÉ

So?

CAMILLE

So nobody swapped the mass. It's the same folder, the same pages, with the same stain. It's what was written on them that isn't there any more.

(Silence.)

JONAS

Somebody rubbed out thirty pages in ten minutes?

ZOÉ

You can't rub out ink.

ELENA

With some product? There are products.

JONAS

You've got the whole pharmacy in your bag.

ELENA

There's nothing in my bag for removing masses, Jonas.

MARCO

A mass doesn't just wipe itself off.

CAMILLE

So that leaves us two questions. Who put the folder in the oven. And how a mass empties itself.

ROSA

Three questions. And who's going to apologise to me.

(A pause.)

NINA

If it isn't a swap, there's no real mass in Villiers.

ROSA

There you are.

ELENA

That doesn't mean she didn't empty it before she put it in the oven.

ROSA

Empty it with what? My rosary?

MARTHE

Rosa has never emptied anything in her life, not even her cup. She always leaves a drop at the bottom, for the leaves.

(The timer rings. Nina stops it.)

NINA

Warm-up. Staccato, on "ha". One "ha" per beat, from the belly.

(They do short "ha"s, in rhythm, louder and louder. Camille goes on leafing through the pages.)

CAMILLE

Ha. Ha. Even the title's gone. Ha.

NINA

From the belly, Camille!

SCENE 2: THE SACRISTY

CAMILLE

Back to the first question. During the break, who went into the kitchen?

(Nobody raises a hand.)

CAMILLE

Nobody. And yet the folder got there. That oven creaks. Just now, when Rosa opened it, we heard it from in here. During the break, nobody heard anything?

ROSA

The boiler.

CAMILLE

The boiler?

ROSA

Towards the end of the break. A long groan, behind the wall. I even said to Camille: "Listen, that's Jonas's boiler." It's been making that noise since Tuesday, he told us last night.

CAMILLE

That's true. I don't know the boiler, I took Rosa's word for it.

MARTHE

I heard it too. With the cups and all the chatter, a boiler and an oven groan just the same.

JONAS

The boiler hasn't made a sound all evening.

CAMILLE

How do you know?

JONAS

I was right next to it.

CAMILLE

For ten minutes, next to a boiler that wasn't doing anything.

(Silence. Elena and Jonas exchange a look, very brief.)

MARTHE

Elena, are you cold?

ELENA

No. Why?

MARTHE

You've been rubbing your arms for ten minutes. You arrived tonight wearing a green scarf. A lovely one, silk.

ELENA

I took it off. It's hot in here.

MARTHE

You've just said you weren't cold, now you say it's hot. You'll have to pick one.

ROSA

Jonas has got a green scarf sticking out of his pocket.

(Everyone looks at Jonas's pocket. He stuffs the scarf down into it.)

JONAS

It's mine.

MARTHE

It smells of Elena's perfume from three metres away. I'm old, I haven't got a cold.

NINA

Jonas. Where is it, this boiler of yours?

JONAS

In the sacristy.

CAMILLE

And Elena wasn't in the toilets.

ELENA

The toilets are next to the sacristy.

CAMILLE

Everything's next to something.

(A pause. Elena looks at Jonas. Jonas looks at the ceiling.)

ELENA

All right. Yes. We were in the sacristy. Both of us.

ROSA

Ah.

ELENA

For three months. Not in the sacristy for three months: together for three months.

JONAS

The sacristy is only during breaks.

NINA

And why haven't you said anything?

ELENA

Because in this village, if you say good morning to someone in the pharmacy on Monday, by Tuesday you're engaged, and by Wednesday everyone knows why you got divorced.

JONAS

We wanted some peace. At least until the competition.

ROSA

I knew it.

MARTHE

Everybody knew it.

NINA

I didn't know.

CAMILLE

Nor did I. But I've only been here three weeks.

MARCO

I knew. Jonas has been buying two croissants since March. He lives alone.

JONAS

Thank you, Marco.

MARCO

I give people their change, I notice things.

CAMILLE

Back to the oven. In the sacristy, did you hear anything?

ELENA

The wall is very thin. You can hear everything that goes on in the kitchen.

JONAS

We heard the oven creak. Like just now. Not the boiler: the oven. I know my boiler.

ELENA

We panicked. We thought it was Rosa coming into the sacristy for sugar, she hides the sugar in the vestment cupboard.

ROSA

Because of the mice.

CAMILLE

When was this?

JONAS

Towards the end. Just before Nina clapped her hands. We hurried back, each through a different door.

ELENA

Me through the toilets.

CAMILLE

The boiler groaning. When Rosa pointed it out to me, she was pouring my third cup. It wasn't Rosa who opened the oven.

(Everyone turns to Rosa.)

NINA

Rosa.

ROSA

Yes?

NINA

I'm sorry.

ROSA

For the oven, or for the motorboat?

NINA

For everything. For Villiers too.

ROSA

I'm not apologising for Villiers. I sing where I like.

(Rosa holds out the tray to Nina. Nina takes a turnover.)

ROSA

There. We're quits.

JONAS

So somebody else opened the oven. Somebody who wasn't at the teapot or in the sacristy.

ZOÉ

I was in the cloakroom. That's on the other side of the hall.

NINA

And I was in the corridor, with the coach company's hold music.

MARTHE

And I was resting my eyes.

CAMILLE

Marthe. When you rest your eyes, do you close them completely?

MARTHE

Never completely. Otherwise I'd be asleep, and when I'm asleep, I snore. We've been through this.

CAMILLE

So you saw something.

MARTHE

I saw what I see every break. Rosa and her teapot. You, with your third cup. Nina's back, on the phone in the corridor. And Marco.

(A pause.)

MARTHE

Marco wasn't at the window.

MARCO

Marthe.

MARTHE

He was at the piano. He was holding the red folder, he'd opened it, he was looking at it very closely. I found it touching, at the time. I thought: well, well, Marco's going over the mass.

NINA

You saw him, and you let Rosa be accused for an hour?

MARTHE

I defended Rosa. Badly, but I defended her. And about Marco, I know something that Marco would rather say himself. I was waiting for him to say it. He's taken his time.

(Everyone turns to Marco. He has a turnover in his hand. He puts it down.)

SCENE 3: THE TENOR

MARCO

Yes. It was me. I put it in the oven.

NINA

Marco!

MARCO

I didn't empty it! I put it in an oven that was switched off. Jonas told everyone, back in October: the oven doesn't work any more. An oven that doesn't work is the best drawer in the world. Nobody opens an oven that doesn't work.

JONAS

I said it kept things warm.

MARCO

You said it didn't work any more! That's all I heard. And then along comes Rosa with my own turnovers...

ROSA

So that's why "they're better cold".

MARCO

Yes.

ROSA

You made me doubt the entire bakery.

CAMILLE

Why take it during the break? Everyone was bound to see it was gone the moment we started again.

MARCO

I didn't mean to take it. I wanted three bars. The ones in the Agnus that Nina changed last week. I opened the mass on the piano and got my phone out to take a photo of them. For my daughter.

NINA

Your daughter?

MARCO

She's at the conservatoire, in Caen. She's coming home tonight. I wanted her to sing me those three bars tonight.

ELENA

And?

MARCO

And I couldn't find the Agnus. I kept turning pages. And Nina hung up. I saw her coming back from the corridor, I had the mass open in my hands, the kitchen was three steps away. The oven was the first place that came

into my head. I'm a baker.

CAMILLE

And then?

MARCO

Then, at ten o'clock, I'd nip into the kitchen before anyone else, take my photos, and "find" it. Behind the radiator. Nobody would ever have known.

ZOÉ

You've got your part in your pocket. Your daughter could have read that.

MARCO

My part was copied out for me by Elena, in September. The three bars from last week aren't in it.

ELENA

You told me your eyes were hurting.

MARCO

My eyes do hurt. And I can't read music.

(A silence.)

MARCO

There. Thirty years I've sung in this choir, and I can't read a note. The black blobs, the white blobs, the little flags: to me it's a fence with birds sitting on it. I can never tell which one's going to fly off.

ELENA

Earlier on, I turned your part the right way up.

MARCO

I know. Thanks. You've been doing it for three years.

(He takes his part out of his pocket, unfolds it upside down and turns it round.)

MARCO

On my first day, Odile gave me a score. I held it upside down. She didn't say a word. The next day she gave me a cassette. She'd sung my part onto it. The tenor line, in her own voice, an octave higher. Thirty years of cassettes. Then CDs. Then voice messages on my phone. I kept every one. The mass, she sang me as far as the Sanctus. She died before the Agnus.

ROSA

Oh, Marco.

MARCO

The Agnus, I learned by listening to Zoé play it. I knew it. And last week Nina changed three bars, "going by the manuscript". And I don't know which ones. Ever since, I've been singing the old version, hoping nobody can hear.

ZOÉ

We can hear.

MARCO

I know you can hear!

NINA

You could have asked me.

MARCO

Asked you what? "Nina, I'm fifty-two, I've been making bread since I was fifteen, teach me what a treble clef is"? In front of everyone?

MARTHE

I knew.

MARCO

You knew?

MARTHE

You hold your part the way people hold a menu in a foreign language.

CAMILLE

So Marco hid it. And Marco didn't empty it. That leaves the second question.

NINA

Wait.

(A pause. Nina looks at the red folder on the piano.)

NINA

Last week, I didn't change three bars going by the manuscript.

ZOÉ

Yes, you did. You told us.

NINA

I guessed them.

ELENA

What do you mean, guessed them?

NINA

I can't read Odile. Nobody can read Odile. She wrote tiny, she corrected on top, she rubbed out, she wrote it again alongside, and sometimes she forgot to rub out the first version. In the Agnus, there are bars where I see two notes on top of each other. So I choose. For six months, I've been choosing. I guess a third of her mass.

MARCO

And the three bars from last week?

NINA

I chose differently. That's all.

MARCO

I hid a mass in an oven for three bars you guessed.

NINA

Yes.

(Nina takes a few steps. She picks up the timer from the piano and looks at it.)

NINA

Do you know whose timer this is? Odile's. I found it in the piano drawer in December. I conduct with her baton, from her mass, with her rule about the locked door, her warm-ups in her order, and her timer. For six months people have called me "the stand-in". At school, at the bakery, at Mass on Sunday. "So, how's the stand-in getting on?" I stand in. I do what she did. I guess what she would have wanted. And tonight, when I saw the folder wasn't on the piano any more, for one second, just one, I was relieved. I thought: tomorrow we'll sing what we know, and it'll be us. It'll be me. One second. Then I was ashamed of myself, and I started the warm-ups.

(Silence.)

MARTHE

One second is nothing much. I was relieved for forty years.

SCENE 4: THE FREEZER

CAMILLE

The second question, then. How a mass empties itself in an oven that doesn't heat.

JONAS

It does heat. A bit. Sixty degrees.

ZOÉ

At sixty degrees, paper doesn't burn. Ink doesn't just vanish.

(Marthe gets up out of her armchair, slowly, for the first time this evening. She changes glasses, takes a page from the folder and looks at it very closely.)

ROSA

Marthe's on her feet.

MARTHE

It does.

(Everyone turns to Marthe.)

MARTHE

The pens.

NINA

What pens?

MARTHE

Mine. The ones I gave her every Christmas. The pens that rub out. There's a little rubber on the end. You rub, it heats up, and the ink disappears. It isn't the rubber that does it, it's the heat. It says so on the box: "Ink disappears with heat." Forty boxes, I've had time to read it.

ELENA

And the oven...

MARTHE

The oven rubbed out every page at once. For twenty minutes. It erased Odile's mass, note by note, with Marco's turnovers sitting on top.

(A pause. Marco looks at his turnover.)

MARCO

I'll never be able to eat one again.

ZOÉ

Then it's over. It doesn't exist any more. Thirty pages, eight months, and an oven at sixty degrees.

NINA

Be quiet, Zoé.

ZOÉ

No, I won't be quiet, it's the truth.

CAMILLE

Not necessarily.

(Everyone turns to Camille.)

CAMILLE

Last year I had a case. A cheque. Someone had written "one hundred euros" with a pen like those, then rubbed it out and written "one thousand". Not a trace left. The lab put the cheque in a freezer. In deep cold, ink that's been rubbed out comes back. And under the "one thousand", the "one hundred" reappeared.

ROSA

And the gentleman?

CAMILLE

Very disappointed.

NINA

You'd swear to it?

CAMILLE

On my case file. Why the ink went in the first place, I never found out: all they told me about was the cold. Minus ten, minus twenty. Everything that's been rubbed out comes back.

JONAS

The freezer in the cellar. It goes down to minus twenty-four.

NINA

Go. Go on, Jonas.

(Jonas grabs the red folder and runs out through the sacristy door.)

ELENA

How long does it take?

CAMILLE

I don't know. The lab talked about a whole night. We could try twenty minutes.

NINA

Twenty minutes.

(Nina winds the timer and puts it on the piano. Jonas comes back, out of breath.)

JONAS

It's in between the ice lollies and the priest's leg of lamb.

NINA

Good. We wait. And while we wait, we hum. Mouths closed. Everyone on their own note, and hold it.

(They hum, mouths closed, softly. One long chord, held. Zoé doesn't sing. After a while, she speaks over it.)

ZOÉ

The envelope.

(The humming fades out.)

ZOÉ

You want to know what's in the envelope. It's a contract. Lyon Conservatoire. Piano teacher. I start in September. That wasn't my mother on the phone, it was them. Tomorrow's my last concert with you.

(A pause.)

ROSA

Lyon.

ZOÉ

Yes.

ROSA

Do they have choirs in Lyon?

ZOÉ

About two hundred.

ROSA

You'll be able to sing in two.

NINA

When were you going to tell us?

ZOÉ

After the competition. On the coach. When everyone was tired and happy.

MARCO

Is that why you kept saying the mass wasn't any good?

ZOÉ

Maybe. It's easier to leave something that isn't any good.

MARTHE

That's true. I've known it since 1985.

CAMILLE

1985 again.

MARTHE

Somebody has to tell it properly for once. Odile, ten votes. Me, nine. There were nineteen people in the room. Nineteen, counting the two of us.

JONAS

So Odile voted for herself.

MARTHE

No. Odile voted for me. She told me that same night, pleased as Punch. She wanted me to be conductor.

ELENA

Then who voted for Odile?

MARTHE

I did.

(Silence.)

MARTHE

I was the one who sang well. She was the one who listened. It's not the same thing. When Rosa went sharp. When the basses dozed off on their D. When a tenor sang with his music upside down. She heard all of it, and she knew what to do about it. You need someone who listens. I slipped her name into the box, and I lost by one vote. Mine. I never told her. All her life she thought she'd beaten me.

ROSA

And you let her think it.

MARTHE

Forty years. It gave me a reason to buy her those horrible pens.

(The timer rings. Nobody moves. Then Jonas gets up.)

SCENE 5: SOTTO VOCE

(Jonas goes out through the sacristy. Everyone waits, standing. He comes back with the red folder, covered in frost. He puts it on the piano. Nobody opens it.)

NINA

Zoé.

(Zoé opens the folder. She looks at the first page. For a long time.)

ELENA

Well?

ZOÉ

They've come back.

(Shouts. Rosa hugs Marco. Jonas lifts Elena off her feet.)

ZOÉ

Wait. Wait! They've come back. All of them.

NINA

What do you mean, all of them?

ZOÉ

All the notes. The ones she wrote, and the ones she rubbed out. Everything, on top of everything. Look at the Kyrie: there are four versions of the first bar, one on top of the other. The Gloria looks like an anthill.

(Nina looks, turns the pages.)

NINA

It's unreadable.

JONAS

More than usual?

NINA

Six months of second thoughts, Jonas. All at once.

ZOÉ

Wait. There are words. In the margins.

MARTHE

Sotto voce.

(They all move in closer. Zoé reads, following with her finger.)

ZOÉ

Page two. "Marco can't read. Never tell him."

MARCO

She wrote it down.

ZOÉ

And underneath: "Lower the B." And next to it, again: "Lower." And

again. Four times. She lowered your note four times, Marco, a semitone each time. Your B is a G. I've been playing you a G since September.

MARCO

You knew?

ZOÉ

Everyone says "your B". I wasn't going to upset you.

MARCO

I love my G.

ZOÉ

Page five. "Zoé plays too fast when she's bored."

(A pause.)

ZOÉ

That's true.

(She turns the pages.)

ZOÉ

Page eight. "Rosa. Tuesdays, Villiers." And just underneath: "Ask her for the turnover recipe."

ROSA

She never asked me.

MARCO

They're my turnovers, Rosa.

ROSA

Yes, but it's my way of warming them up.

ZOÉ

Page eleven. "Elena and Jonas. One day."

ELENA

One day?

JONAS

She knew before we did.

ZOÉ

Page twelve. "Elena. Rouen got it wrong."

(Elena says nothing. Jonas takes her hand.)

ELENA

She never said a word to me about it.

ROSA

She's saying it on page twelve.

ZOÉ

Page fourteen. "Jonas. The D. If the D moves, everything falls."

JONAS

Did you hear that? The ground.

ZOÉ

Page sixteen. "Marthe. Never said thank you." And beside it: "The pens are horrible."

MARTHE

Thank you for what?

ZOÉ

That's all there is.

MARTHE

She could count, Odile. She always could.

(Marthe laughs, softly, and sits back down.)

ZOÉ

Page twenty. "Write to Camille." And beside it, again: "Write to Camille." And further down. And again. Four times.

(Camille comes over and looks at the page.)

CAMILLE

She never wrote.

MARTHE

She wrote four times. She rubbed it out four times. That's a way of writing.

NINA

And me?

(Zoé turns the pages, searching.)

ZOÉ

Last page. Right at the bottom. "Nina. After me."

(Silence. Nina doesn't move.)

ZOÉ

And underneath, smaller: "And she's not to keep my timer."

(Nina looks at the timer on the piano. She picks it up, opens the piano drawer, puts it inside and closes the drawer.)

NINA

Good.

ZOÉ

And the mass?

NINA

What about the mass?

ZOÉ

For six months I've been saying it isn't any good. I've just seen her four versions of the Kyrie. The first one was the best. She'd rubbed it out. She rubbed out the best bars, one by one, to make it easier for us to sing. I've only been playing half of it.

NINA

Tomorrow you'll play all of it.

MARCO

So what do we do with the anthill?

ZOÉ

With this, and your parts, I can rebuild it. Everyone has to sing me their line, bar by bar, and out of the versions I'll pick the one that...

NINA

No.

(Everyone turns to Nina.)

NINA

You play. They sing. I choose. Camille writes down what I choose.

CAMILLE

I can't read a note.

MARTHE

Like Marco. You're in good company.

NINA

You write: "Kyrie, version two, bar twelve." Numbers. Numbers are your job. And it's Camille's mass too.

CAMILLE

If it's my mass, then I'm deciding one thing. Tomorrow morning, at the town hall, we make twenty copies.

MARTHE

One does not photocopy Odile.

CAMILLE

Odile, no. Me, yes.

MARTHE

You even sound like her.

JONAS

It's eleven o'clock. Shall I unlock the door?

NINA

No. We've got until seven.

ROSA

I'll make more tea.

MARCO

I'll go back and get some more. Turnovers. Cold ones.

NINA

Nobody goes out, Marco.

(Nina takes the tuning fork from her pocket, strikes it on the piano and holds it to her ear. She sings an A. Everyone takes it up, together.)

NINA

Kyrie. First version. Marco, page one.

MARCO

Which page?

NINA

None. Sing.

(They sing. Camille takes notes. The light slowly fades on the choir.)

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