

Three Knocks

Chamber piece · 2-character play · 1 man, 1 either · 50 min · Advanced · Ages 14+

On the last night before a high mountain hut closes for the winter, the storm cuts off the radio and someone knocks at the door. The keeper takes a long time to open it. The story told by the person who comes in has gaps, and the old man has his reasons for wanting no one there that night. Until morning, both of them will wonder which side of the door the danger is on.

The Pierre Blanche hut, 2,700 meters up in the Alps, on the night of October 14, the present day.

Casting

JOSEPH (Male role, Senior) 66, keeper of the hut for thirty-one seasons; tomorrow, a helicopter is due to take him down for good.

ALEX (No gender marker, Adult) 32, knocks at the hut door on a stormy night, carrying a pack that is too light.

ACT ONE : THE DOOR

SCENE 1

(The common room of a mountain hut. A long table, benches, a stove. A radio on a shelf, next to a row of old logbooks. In the window, small and barred with iron, a lamp is lit. Outside, the wind.)

(Joseph, at the radio handset.)

JOSEPH. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges, do you read me?

(Static.)

JOSEPH. Yes, Hervé. It's blowing, yes. Eighty, maybe more up on the ridge. No, the roof's holding. It's held for thirty-one winters, it'll hold one more night.

(Static.)

JOSEPH. No. Nobody. The last ones went down on Sunday. I'm alone. Everything's cleared out, the blankets are folded, the gas is off. There's nothing left but me and the stove.

(Static.)

JOSEPH. Nine o'clock, if he can make it. No need to hurry. If the wind doesn't drop, don't send Bruno up for nothing. I'm not going anywhere.

(Static, longer.)

JOSEPH. Yes. I know what day it is. Good night, Hervé.

(He hangs up the handset. He puts a log in the stove. On the table, a sealed envelope; he pushes it to the middle, lines it up with the edge.)

(From his shirt pocket he takes a folded sheet of paper, looks at it without unfolding it, puts it back in his pocket.)

(He hums a tune, a few notes, always the same ones.)

(A knock at the door.)

(Joseph stops dead.)

JOSEPH. One knock, it's the wind.

(Another knock, louder.)

JOSEPH. Two knocks, it's the snow.

ALEX. Is anyone there? I can see the light!

(Joseph looks at the lamp in the window. He doesn't move.)

ALEX. Please! I can't feel my hands! Open up!

(Pounding, with both fists, that won't stop.)

(Joseph goes to the door. He puts his hand on the bolt. A pause. He opens it. Wind and snow come in with Alex, who almost falls.)

SCENE 2

(Joseph shuts the door and slides the bolt. Alex, covered in snow up to the shoulders, leans against the wall, hands jammed under the arms.)

JOSEPH. There. By the stove. Not too close.

ALEX. Thank you. Thank you...

JOSEPH. Your gloves. Take them off.

(Alex tries. The fingers won't obey. Joseph pulls the gloves off, throws them on the table, takes Alex's hands in his own.)

JOSEPH. Move your fingers. All of them. The little one too.

ALEX. It burns.

JOSEPH. Good. If it burns, it's alive. Once it stops burning, they cut it off.

(He crouches and unlaces Alex's boots. He turns them upside down: a trickle of water runs onto the floorboards.)

JOSEPH. They're new.

ALEX. I bought them last week.

JOSEPH. To come up here?

ALEX. To walk.

JOSEPH. Nobody goes out for the first time in new boots on the fourteenth of October, with eighty-kilometer winds forecast since Monday.

ALEX. I didn't listen to the forecast.

JOSEPH. Everybody listens to the forecast. Even the cows listen to the forecast.

(He throws a blanket over Alex's shoulders, pours something hot into a bowl, holds it out.)

JOSEPH. Drink. Slowly.

(Alex drinks. A pause.)

ALEX. You took your time.

JOSEPH. Doing what?

ALEX. Opening up.

JOSEPH. The hut is closed.

ALEX. There was a light on.

JOSEPH. There's always a light on. That's why people knock.

ALEX. I saw your shadow. Behind the glass. You were standing there, right up against the door.

JOSEPH. Where have you come from?

ALEX. From down below. Les Granges.

JOSEPH. What time?

ALEX. This morning. Seven.

JOSEPH. Seven. It's nine at night. From Les Granges to here is five hours. Six, if you dawdle.

ALEX. I missed a fork in the trail.

JOSEPH. Which one?

ALEX. After the shepherds' hut. I went left. The Lauzet trail.

JOSEPH. The Lauzet's been closed since August. Half the cliff came down on it. There's a barrier, two signs, and a red tape as long as the valley.

ALEX. Then it wasn't the Lauzet.

JOSEPH. What was it?

ALEX. I don't know. There was fog, then snow, then nothing at all. No trail,

no cairns, no up or down. So I went up. Up, at least, I knew where that was.

JOSEPH. And when it got dark? How did you manage in the dark?

ALEX. Badly.

JOSEPH. You don't have a headlamp?

ALEX. The batteries. The cold drained them.

JOSEPH. The cold drains everything.

(He points to a map pinned to the wall, yellowed, covered in pencil lines.)

JOSEPH. Show me.

ALEX. Show you what?

JOSEPH. Your route. From the shepherds' hut.

(Alex gets up, the blanket around the shoulders, and goes to the map. Alex's finger finds the hut at once, follows a line upward, stops.)

ALEX. There. The fog. After that, I don't know. I must have cut across here, under the rock band, and come out at the top of the Combes valley.

JOSEPH. The Combes valley.

ALEX. It's written right there.

JOSEPH. In very small letters. You read maps well, for someone who missed a fork.

ALEX. I read maps well when I'm warm.

JOSEPH. The Combes is the way you take when you want to go down without being seen from Les Granges. Nobody takes it to come up.

ALEX. Then I'm the first one.

(Joseph looks at the map for a while.)

(He goes to the radio, picks up the handset.)

ALEX. What are you doing?

JOSEPH. Letting the valley know. Is anyone waiting for you down there? Someone who'll call mountain rescue at midnight because they haven't heard from you?

ALEX. No.

JOSEPH. Nobody.

ALEX. Nobody waiting.

JOSEPH. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges.

(Nothing. Not even static.)

JOSEPH. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges, Hervé, do you read me?

(Nothing. Joseph turns a knob, then another. He taps the casing.)

JOSEPH. It was working ten minutes ago.

ALEX. It's the storm.

JOSEPH. This radio is thirty years old. It's talked through storms that tore the metal sheets off the roof. It crackles, it spits, it never goes quiet.

ALEX. There's a first time for everything.

(Joseph hangs up. He looks at Alex.)

JOSEPH. Your name.

ALEX. Alex.

(A pause.)

JOSEPH. Alex what?

ALEX. Alex Roux. And you?

JOSEPH. The keeper.

ALEX. That's not a name, that's a job.

JOSEPH. Joseph.

ALEX. Thank you, Joseph. For the door.

JOSEPH. Thank the lamp.

(Alex holds both hands out to the stove. Above it, hanging from a nail, a small red mitten, faded, stiff with age.)

ALEX. Whose is the mitten?

JOSEPH. What mitten?

ALEX. There's only one. Above the stove. It's tiny.

JOSEPH. Somebody left it behind.

ALEX. When?

JOSEPH. A long time ago.

ALEX. And you kept it.

JOSEPH. People come back for their things.

ALEX. A child's mitten? Who comes back for a child's mitten?

JOSEPH. Nobody. But I keep it all the same. Finish your bowl.

(Alex drinks. Joseph lays Alex's gloves out flat by the stove, with care.)

JOSEPH. Once you've warmed up, I'll show you the winter room.

ALEX. The what?

JOSEPH. Round the back. A room that stays open all winter, for whoever comes through when there's no keeper. Twelve bunks, blankets, a door that shuts.

ALEX. Is there a stove?

JOSEPH. There are blankets.

ALEX. How cold is it in there?

JOSEPH. Zero. Minus two, toward morning. People survive it just fine.

ALEX. You're going to make me sleep in the cold. After all that.

JOSEPH. I'm going to make you sleep next door.

ALEX. There's a stove in here. There's room. There are twenty empty benches.

JOSEPH. In here is my home until nine tomorrow morning. The winter room belongs to everybody. You're everybody.

ALEX. I won't get in your way. I'll sleep on the floor, there, against the wall, I won't make a sound. And I'll head down at first light.

JOSEPH. You're not walking down. You're taking the helicopter with me.

ALEX. At first light, I'll do as I please.

JOSEPH. At first light, you'll do as I say. There's half a meter of fresh snow on smooth slabs, and a rock band you won't see until you're over it. As

long as you're anywhere near this hut, you're my responsibility.

ALEX. And what if I don't want to be anybody's responsibility?

JOSEPH. Then you should have knocked somewhere else.

(He opens the drawer under the radio. He takes out a big orange pistol, checks the cartridge, puts it back in the drawer and shuts it.)

ALEX. What's that?

JOSEPH. A flare gun.

ALEX. Why are you getting it out?

JOSEPH. I'm not getting it out. I'm checking it's there.

ALEX. And it's there.

JOSEPH. If the radio doesn't come back, it's all we've got left to talk to the valley. One red flare, over the pass. They can see it from the police station, when it isn't snowing.

ALEX. And when it's snowing?

JOSEPH. When it's snowing, we wait.

SCENE 3

(Later. The wind slams against the shutters. Alex, under the blanket, bare feet toward the stove. Joseph is splitting kindling with a knife, without looking up.)

ALEX. What are you doing with that knife?

JOSEPH. Kindling. For whoever opens up next summer. You always leave kindling for the one who comes after you.

(A pause.)

JOSEPH. And you, down there? What do you do when you're not out walking in new boots?

ALEX. I fix elevators.

JOSEPH. Elevators.

ALEX. People get stuck between two floors. They press every button, they shout, they bang on the doors. And then I show up. I hear them banging a long time before I see them.

JOSEPH. And when you get the doors open?

ALEX. They all say the same thing. "You took your time."

(Joseph doesn't look up.)

JOSEPH. So you know your way around a cable.

ALEX. I know my way around a cable.

(A pause. Alex points to the shelf.)

ALEX. What are those books?

JOSEPH. The logbooks. One a season. Everybody signs in when they arrive: name, where they've come from, where they're headed, what the weather's doing.

ALEX. Do I have to sign?

JOSEPH. This year's book went down on Sunday, with the garbage and the dirty blankets.

ALEX. And those?

JOSEPH. The old ones. Thirty-one of them.

ALEX. You keep them all.

JOSEPH. I keep everything.

ALEX. Can I look?

JOSEPH. No.

ALEX. Why not?

JOSEPH. Because it isn't a picture book. Those are people who came through.

ALEX. Did they all make it back down, your people who came through?

JOSEPH. Almost all.

ALEX. And the others?

JOSEPH. The cold is a liar. At first, it hurts. At the end, it tells you you're warm. In the spring we find them in their shirtsleeves in the snow, the jacket folded beside them, the gloves laid on a rock. They got too warm.

ALEX. Have you found a lot of them?

JOSEPH. Enough.

ALEX. Here?

JOSEPH. Around here.

ALEX. Near the door?

(Joseph looks up. A pause.)

JOSEPH. Why near the door?

ALEX. Because that's where it would have ended, for me. If you hadn't opened.

(Joseph goes back to his kindling.)

ALEX. You didn't tell the truth, earlier.

JOSEPH. To who?

ALEX. On the radio. You said you were alone.

JOSEPH. I was.

ALEX. And "no need to hurry." Why would a man closing up his hut tell the valley there's no need to hurry to come and get him?

(Joseph puts down the knife.)

JOSEPH. How do you know what I said on the radio?

(A pause.)

ALEX. I was under the window.

JOSEPH. For how long?

ALEX. Long enough.

JOSEPH. You were under my window, with your hands frozen, and you didn't knock.

ALEX. I heard a man alone at night, on top of a mountain, telling the valley there's no need to hurry. Saying "I know what day it is." Would you have knocked?

JOSEPH. With hands in that state, I'd have knocked at the devil's door.

ALEX. That's what I ended up doing.

JOSEPH. And what day is it?

ALEX. The fourteenth.

JOSEPH. The fourteenth of what?

ALEX. The fourteenth of October. You said so yourself. The fourteenth of October, in new boots.

(Joseph picks up his knife again, his piece of wood.)

ALEX. It's your last night here.

JOSEPH. The hut closes every year.

ALEX. Not every year with a helicopter all to yourself. "There's nothing left but me and the stove."

JOSEPH. You listen well, under windows.

ALEX. Are they throwing you out?

JOSEPH. They're bringing me down. The club found someone. A young man. He's got a business degree, a website, and a head full of solar panels. Next summer there'll be hot showers and a vegetarian menu.

ALEX. And you?

JOSEPH. Me, I'll have a two-room apartment in Les Granges, with a view of the hikers' parking lot. I'll watch them set off in the morning. I'll count the ones who come back at night.

ALEX. And the letter? On the table. Who's it for?

(Joseph turns the envelope face down on the table.)

JOSEPH. For the valley.

ALEX. You have a radio, for the valley.

JOSEPH. Some things don't go over the radio.

ALEX. And the lamp?

JOSEPH. What about the lamp?

ALEX. You're not expecting anyone, and you leave a lamp burning in the window. All night. You don't want anyone to knock, and you put out a light so they'll knock.

JOSEPH. It's a habit.

ALEX. Since when?

JOSEPH. Since a long time.

(Alex gets up, the blanket around the shoulders, and goes over to the window. Alex touches the bars.)

ALEX. Bars. At two thousand seven hundred meters.

JOSEPH. In winter, the wind breaks the glass. So do people who are cold.

(Alex looks at the lamp.)

ALEX. It used to be blue. Didn't it?

(Joseph stops dead.)

JOSEPH. What did you say?

ALEX. The lamp. There was blue glass around it. It made everything blue at night, your hands, the walls, the snow behind the window.

JOSEPH. Where did you see that?

ALEX. I don't know. In a photo. Some web page about old mountain huts.

JOSEPH. The blue glass broke in the winter of two thousand and one. Nobody up here had a phone to take pictures with, back then. And nobody took pictures of the lamp.

ALEX. Then I dreamed it. I've never set foot in this place. Never.

JOSEPH. How old are you?

ALEX. Thirty-two. Why?

(Alex stays facing the window. Behind Alex, Joseph gets up, unhooks the mitten above the stove and slips it into his shirt pocket.)

JOSEPH. The winter room. Now.

ALEX. You said: once I'd warmed up.

JOSEPH. You're warm.

ALEX. No.

JOSEPH. I'm not asking your opinion.

ALEX. My feet are still white. Look. Do you want to look at them? You said it yourself: once it stops burning, they cut it off. You want them to cut my toes off, for your peace and quiet?

(A pause. Joseph sits back down.)

JOSEPH. One hour.

ALEX. One hour.

JOSEPH. One hour here, by the stove, and then you go round the back. I'll give you my blankets. All of them. But you go round the back.

ALEX. What's happening tonight that I'm not supposed to see?

JOSEPH. Nothing. Nothing's happening. Nothing's supposed to happen.

(Alex lies down on the bench, the blanket pulled up over the head. A long pause. The wind. Alex's breathing slows.)

(Joseph gets up without a sound. He opens Alex's pack. He takes out a headlamp; he presses the button: it lights up. He switches it off.)

(He takes a pair of wire cutters out of the pack. He looks closely at the jaws. He pulls a small scrap of black rubber from between them.)

(Alex's eyes are open.)

ALEX. You're going through my things.

JOSEPH. Your headlamp works.

ALEX. It must have warmed up.

JOSEPH. And this?

ALEX. Wire cutters.

JOSEPH. I can see they're wire cutters.

ALEX. Everybody has wire cutters in their pack.

JOSEPH. Not with the casing off my antenna cable stuck in the jaws.

(Silence. They look at each other.)

JOSEPH. I'm going to check the antenna.

ALEX. I'll come with you.

JOSEPH. No. You stay here. By the stove. Not too close.

(He puts on his jacket. With his back to Alex, he opens the drawer under the radio, takes out the pistol, removes the cartridge and slips it into his pocket, puts the pistol back and shuts the drawer. He takes a flashlight, opens the door. The wind rushes in. He goes out and pulls the door shut behind him.)

(Alex stays perfectly still. Then Alex goes to the drawer under the radio and takes the flare gun. Alex goes to the door and slides the bolt.)

(A pause. Someone tries the door. The bolt holds.)

JOSEPH. Alex.

(Alex doesn't move.)

JOSEPH. Alex, open this door.

(A knock.)

JOSEPH. I can see your shadow behind the glass.

(Another knock, louder.)

ALEX. One.

(A knock.)

ALEX. Two.

(Blackout.)

ACT TWO : THE LOGBOOK

SCENE 1

(Eleven at night. The knocking has stopped. Alex, on the floor facing the door, the flare gun across the knees. The wind.)

ALEX. Joseph?

(Nothing.)

ALEX. Joseph. Answer me.

(Alex gets up, goes to the door, presses an ear against the wood.)

ALEX. I know you're there. You haven't gone. There's nowhere for you to go.

(Nothing but the wind. Alex puts a hand on the bolt. Doesn't slide it back.)

ALEX. Knock. Can you hear me? Knock!

(Behind Alex, at the back of the room, a small door opens. Joseph comes in, covered in snow, a bunch of keys in one hand, a length of black cable in the other. Alex spins round and raises the pistol.)

JOSEPH. This hut has two doors. It's always had two.

ALEX. Don't move.

JOSEPH. The one to the winter room locks from the inside, with a key. And I'm the one with the key.

(He locks the small door behind him.)

(He tosses the piece of cable onto the table.)

JOSEPH. Cut clean. Two meters off the ground, under the eaves. You have to stand on the bench to reach it. The wind doesn't stand on benches.

ALEX. Sit down.

JOSEPH. Do you know how to use that thing?

ALEX. You pull the trigger, it goes off.

JOSEPH. It goes off, yes. It goes three hundred meters up, so the valley can see it. Fired inside a room, it sets fire to the floor, the curtains, the person standing in front of it and the one holding it.

ALEX. Sit down, Joseph.

(Joseph sits at the end of the bench. He takes off his gloves, blows into his hands.)

JOSEPH. I can't feel my fingers.

ALEX. Does it burn?

JOSEPH. Not yet.

ALEX. Then wait. If it burns, it's alive.

JOSEPH. What do you want?

ALEX. To hear you knock.

JOSEPH. I knocked.

ALEX. Not for long. You knew where the other door was. You had the key. He didn't have a key.

(A pause.)

JOSEPH. He.

ALEX. October fourteenth, two thousand. Twenty-six years ago tonight. A man of thirty-eight, Daniel Ferrand, died of cold thirty meters from that door.

JOSEPH. I know what day it is.

ALEX. He was my father.

(Joseph says nothing. He looks at his hands.)

ALEX. Aren't you going to ask how I know? I have the report. Saint-Clair police, four pages, one photo. They found him on the fifteenth, sitting against a rock, in a sweater. His gloves were on the doorstep. Here. Laid in front of your door, one on top of the other. And on the door, gashes. Those ones.

(Alex goes to the door, never letting Joseph out of sight, and runs a hand over the wood. Deep marks, at the height of a man.)

ALEX. Thirty-one seasons. You repaint the shutters every two years, I saw the paint outside, it's fresh. The door, never. You never once sanded it down. Did you want to keep them?

JOSEPH. I keep everything.

ALEX. He had his knife in his hand. Open. The police wrote: "he appears to have tried to force the door of the hut with his knife." He wanted to get in, he wanted to live, he scraped at your door until his hands gave out. And the keeper said... do you know what the keeper said?

JOSEPH. That I was asleep.

ALEX. "I didn't hear anything. The wind was too loud. I was asleep."

JOSEPH. That's what I said.

ALEX. You weren't asleep.

(A pause.)

JOSEPH. No.

ALEX. You never sleep. I saw you, tonight. I knocked, and you were standing behind the door, with your shadow on the glass. You listened. You were there

twenty-six years ago, standing just like that, and you listened to a man die.

JOSEPH. Who told you there was anything to look for? The report says I was asleep.

ALEX. My mother.

(Joseph looks up.)

ALEX. She died in April. She never talked about that night. Never. Or about him. Not one photo in the house, not even his name. She'd gone back to her own name, Roux, and she gave it to me. We moved four times. She double-locked the door, day and night, even to take the trash out. She didn't want to hear a word about mountains. No hikes, no pictures of snow. When it snowed, she drew the curtains.

JOSEPH. And him? What do you know about him?

ALEX. What his mother used to tell me, on the quiet, the few times we saw her. That he was funny. That he sang off-key at the top of his lungs in the car. That he drove too fast. That he had a temper, like all the men in that family, and it always blew over. I have three photos. In the best one he's laughing, on a boat, and I'm up on his shoulders.

JOSEPH. And your mother? What did she say?

ALEX. In the hospital, the last week, she didn't know what day it was anymore. She talked to people who weren't there. And one night she grabbed my wrist, very hard, and she said: "He didn't open up." Once. Then she slept. She never said another word, not that day, not after.

JOSEPH. "He didn't open up."

ALEX. Twenty-six years of silence, and four words. So I asked for the report. I read the keeper's name. And the keeper was still here, in the same place, with the same door.

JOSEPH. And you, that night? Where were you?

ALEX. At my grandmother's, in Lyon. I was six. My mother was waiting for him down in the valley.

ALEX. Among her things, afterward, there was a box. A shoebox, under her bed, with tape wound all the way round it. I thought there'd be letters, pictures of him. There was a child's mitten. Just one. Stiff as a board.

ALEX. That's all she kept from that year. One mitten. Can you understand that, you who keep everything?

JOSEPH. You keep what you can.

ALEX. You know what's funny? I've had a dream all my life. Always the same one. Someone knocking, very hard, for a very long time. And a voice counting, right up close to my ear. I can't see anything, everything is blue, and the voice keeps counting. I thought it was him. That it was my father knocking somewhere, and I could hear him. As if you could hear someone knocking at a door two hundred kilometers away.

(A pause. Joseph slowly gets up.)

ALEX. Don't get up.

JOSEPH. My feet. I need to get them closer to the fire.

(Joseph drags the bench toward the stove and sits down. Alex stays standing, the pistol lowered.)

JOSEPH. What are you going to do now?

ALEX. I'm not finished.

SCENE 2

(The wind. Joseph rubs his hands above the stove. Alex paces up and down, the pistol lowered.)

JOSEPH. Earlier, you said: nobody waiting.

ALEX. So?

JOSEPH. At thirty-two. Nobody waiting.

ALEX. Is that any of your business?

JOSEPH. You've read me a police report and your mother's last words. I think I can ask who's waiting for you.

ALEX. There have been people. They end up leaving. I double-lock too. Day and night. I check three times, I get up to check again. Some people find that exhausting.

JOSEPH. And you sleep with a light on.

(Alex stops.)

ALEX. How do you know that?

JOSEPH. I don't know anything. People who double-lock leave a light on. I've

seen plenty of them come through here, people who double-locked. That's not the question. Who's waiting for you?

ALEX. Nobody, I told you. And I'm not in the mountains. I'm in Lyon, on the fourth floor, with two locks and a night-light in the hallway. My mother used to put one in when I was scared of the dark. A blue night-light. She said it was to keep the monsters away. I never knew which ones. Now I've got one right in front of me.

(Joseph doesn't answer.)

(Alex goes to the shelf of logbooks, runs a finger along the spines, pulls one out.)

ALEX. Two thousand.

JOSEPH. Put that back.

ALEX. You said: everybody signs in when they arrive. Name, where they've come from, what the weather's doing.

(Alex sets the logbook on the table, opens it, turns the pages with one hand, the pistol in the other.)

ALEX. "October eleventh. Two Belgians, over the pass, fog." "October twelfth. Nobody." "October thirteenth. A shepherd, for the night, snow."

(Alex turns the page. Stops. Runs a finger down the binding.)

ALEX. There's a page missing.

JOSEPH. There was nobody here on the fourteenth.

ALEX. Then why tear it out?

JOSEPH. I burned it.

ALEX. Why?

JOSEPH. Because there was nothing on it.

ALEX. You don't tear out a blank page, Joseph. You don't tear a blank page out of a book where you even keep a couple of Belgians passing through in the fog.

JOSEPH. There was nobody.

ALEX. There was somebody. Somebody signed in that day. Somebody was in here, in the warm, while he was knocking. Somebody saw you not open the door, and you tore out their name so that nobody would ever ask them about it.

(Joseph puts a hand on his chest.)

JOSEPH. Nobody saw anything.

ALEX. Who?

JOSEPH. You want someone to blame. He's sitting right in front of you. Don't look any further, there's nothing further.

ALEX. Then say it.

JOSEPH. Say what?

ALEX. What happened. In your own words. Not "I was asleep."

(A long pause. Joseph looks at the door.)

JOSEPH. He started knocking around eleven at night. About now. Not like you, tonight. You were knocking to get in. He was knocking to break it down. Both fists, then his boot, then something else, a blade, against the wood. I was right there, standing on the exact spot where you saw me earlier. I had my hand on that bolt. I didn't slide it. At some point, he stopped knocking. The wind didn't. At five, I went out. His gloves were on the doorstep. He was further down. Sitting. He'd got too warm.

ALEX. And you lied.

JOSEPH. I lied. And ever since, every fourteenth of October, I light that lamp, and I stand behind the door until morning. Twenty-five times. Twenty-five nights, on my feet. Nobody ever knocked. Tonight, somebody knocked.

ALEX. And you thought it was him.

JOSEPH. I thought I was losing my mind. Then you shouted that you couldn't feel your hands. So I opened.

ALEX. This time.

JOSEPH. This time.

(A pause. Alex closes the logbook.)

ALEX. It gets light at seven thirty. You're going to put on your boots and your jacket. You're going to go outside. I'm going to slide the bolt. And you're going to knock until it's light. And I'm going to stand behind the door, counting. And this time, there won't be another door. The keys.

(Joseph looks at Alex. He puts the bunch of keys on the table. Then he digs

in his jacket pocket and sets a fat red cartridge down beside them.)

JOSEPH. And this.

ALEX. What's that?

JOSEPH. What was in your pistol. I took it out when I went to check the antenna.

(Alex looks at the pistol, then at the cartridge.)

ALEX. All this time...

JOSEPH. All this time, you've been holding me at gunpoint with a lump of orange plastic.

ALEX. You could have taken it out of my hands. When you came in the back way. Any time.

JOSEPH. Yes.

ALEX. Why didn't you?

JOSEPH. You needed something to hold on to.

(Alex puts the pistol down on the table, next to the cartridge, without reloading it.)

ALEX. It doesn't change anything. You're still going out.

JOSEPH. I know.

ALEX. You're not going to argue?

JOSEPH. No.

(Joseph gets up, sits on the bench by the door, laces his boots. He puts on his jacket, slowly, button by button.)

ALEX. You've got nothing to say?

JOSEPH. You've said it all.

ALEX. You're going to sit down against a rock and wait? Is that it?

JOSEPH. I'm going to do what you tell me.

(He goes to the door, slides back the bolt, opens it. Wind and snow rush in. The lamp flickers. Joseph stands on the threshold for a moment.)

ALEX. Knock. Once I've locked it, you knock.

(Joseph doesn't answer. He takes one step outside, then another, and walks away from the door.)

ALEX. Joseph! The door's here! Joseph!

(Alex rushes outside. In the dark and the wind, we hear them struggling.)

ALEX. Come back! Joseph!

JOSEPH. Let go of me!

ALEX. You're coming back in! Do you hear me? You're coming back in!

(Alex comes back in backward, dragging Joseph by the jacket with both hands. Joseph fights. Alex pulls harder. They both fall onto the floorboards, in the snow blowing in.)

JOSEPH. Let me go...

ALEX. No.

(Alex gets up, slams the door, slides the bolt, leans back against it, out of breath. Alex looks down at both hands. They are shaking.)

ALEX. All night long, I wanted one thing: to see you outside. And I just dragged you back in.

(Joseph slowly gets up, leans on the table.)

ALEX. You weren't knocking. You were leaving.

JOSEPH. That's what you wanted.

ALEX. I wanted to hear you knock!

JOSEPH. I don't knock on doors.

ALEX. You were heading for the pass. In the dark. Without a headlamp.

JOSEPH. I know the way.

(Alex looks at him. Then Alex goes to the table, picks up the envelope, turns it over.)

ALEX. "To the Saint-Clair police."

JOSEPH. Don't open it.

(Alex opens it. Unfolds a sheet of paper.)

ALEX. "On October fourteenth, two thousand, at around eleven at night, someone knocked at the door of the Pierre Blanche hut. I heard. I did not open the door. I lied to the investigation. I alone am responsible. You will find me tomorrow on the trail to the pass, not far. Don't let your men take any risks, I won't be in any hurry."

(A pause.)

ALEX. You were going out. Tonight. With or without me.

JOSEPH. It was planned before you came.

ALEX. Six months. Six months I've been getting ready for tonight. I read that report a hundred times, I bought boots, I stared at the map until I knew it by heart. And you were going to go and sit against a rock before I even got here. Without even knowing someone was coming to make you answer for it.

JOSEPH. I didn't know anyone was expecting anything from me.

ALEX. That's why: nobody. "No need to hurry." That's why the letter. "I alone am responsible." Alone. Why alone?

(Joseph doesn't answer. His hand comes to rest on his chest.)

ALEX. Who, Joseph? Who was here?

(Blackout.)

ACT THREE : ONE KNOCK, IT'S THE WIND

SCENE 1

(Three in the morning. The wind has dropped a little. Joseph is sitting by the stove, without his jacket. The bunch of keys is on the table. Alex picks up the red cartridge and reloads the flare gun.)

JOSEPH. What are you doing?

ALEX. What you said. A red flare over the pass. They can see it from the police station.

JOSEPH. When it isn't snowing.

(Alex slides back the bolt, opens the door, raises an arm to the sky and fires. A sharp crack. A red glow comes in through the door and the window,

lights up the room, then fades, slowly, and goes out. Alex shuts the door.)

JOSEPH. It's snowing.

ALEX. Maybe they saw it.

JOSEPH. They didn't see a thing. They're asleep. Hervé sleeps next to the radio with his dog, and Bruno won't take the helicopter up until the wind drops.

ALEX. Then I'll fire another one.

JOSEPH. There isn't another one. You just fired the only one.

(Alex puts the empty pistol on the table. Joseph reaches for the keys. Alex gets to them first.)

JOSEPH. Give me those.

ALEX. No.

JOSEPH. It's my hut, until nine o'clock.

ALEX. "As long as you're anywhere near this hut, you're my responsibility." You said that at nine last night. It's three in the morning. My turn.

JOSEPH. Four hours ago, you wanted to see me outside. I was out there. You dragged me back in.

ALEX. I know.

JOSEPH. So what now?

ALEX. So now I want you alive tomorrow. I want a trial. A courtroom, chairs, people listening. I want you to say "I heard" in front of somebody other than me. You're not going off to the pass like you're going on vacation, with a letter on the table and a thank-you for the kindling.

JOSEPH. A trial. For a man of sixty-six and one night twenty-six years ago.

ALEX. Yes.

JOSEPH. Do you know what happens at a trial? They ask questions. Of everybody. They'll ask you to tell your side. They'll go over the report line by line. And they'll wonder, the way you did, why a keeper tears out a blank page. They'll go looking for who was here.

ALEX. Good.

JOSEPH. No.

(He gets up and comes toward Alex, hand open, until it touches the keys.)

JOSEPH. Listen to me. I haven't asked you for anything tonight. I opened the door to you, I warmed your hands, I went outside when you told me to go outside. Now I'm asking you for one thing. Just one. Burn that letter. Give me those keys, and let me go up to the pass when it gets light. And go home, with your mother's words, and whatever you've made of them so far. You've got someone to blame. Keep him.

(Joseph closes his hand over Alex's. They are both holding the keys. Neither lets go.)

ALEX. Let go.

JOSEPH. You first.

ALEX. You can't feel your fingers. You told me so.

JOSEPH. I can feel yours.

(A pause. Joseph lets go.)

ALEX. Why?

JOSEPH. Because there are some doors you don't open again.

ALEX. What are you protecting? Who? Twenty-six years ago, and still tonight. Who's worth you walking up to the pass so you never have to say their name?

(Joseph doesn't answer. Alex looks at him for a long time.)

ALEX. Her. My mother. She wasn't down in the valley, waiting for him. She was here. It's her name on the page you tore out.

(Joseph doesn't move.)

ALEX. The last night of the season, when there's nobody left. She'd come up to be with you. And he found out. It was you he came for.

JOSEPH. Think whatever you like of me.

ALEX. What were you, to her?

JOSEPH. A keeper. With a door.

ALEX. She was thirty. You were forty. Did she come up here, all those summers I spent at my grandmother's? Is that why, all those summers at my grandmother's?

JOSEPH. I'm not going to tell you about your mother.

ALEX. And you left him outside so you could keep her. That's why "I alone am responsible." That's why she drew the curtains when it snowed.

JOSEPH. If that story works for you, keep it. But don't tell it to a judge.

ALEX. I'm staying in front of this door until morning. And the keys stay on me. You won't get out the front, or the back.

(Alex slips the keys under the shirt and sits on the floor, back against the door. Joseph stays standing in the middle of the room. Then he goes back to the stove and sits down.)

(A long pause. Alex rubs one bare foot against the other, looks at them.)

JOSEPH. Are they white?

ALEX. No.

JOSEPH. Show me.

ALEX. Stay where you are.

JOSEPH. When toes go white, then gray, it means the blood isn't getting to the ends anymore. In two hours, they're hard as wood. In three days, a surgeon in Grenoble cuts them off, one by one, and tells you: you should have warmed them up right away.

ALEX. I put them by the stove.

JOSEPH. A stove burns the skin without warming what's underneath. It takes another skin. Give them to me.

ALEX. No.

JOSEPH. Then I'm coming over.

(Joseph takes a stool and sits down facing Alex. He opens his shirt, takes Alex's feet and presses them against his belly. The cold makes him catch his breath.)

ALEX. You're crazy.

JOSEPH. So I've been told.

ALEX. Do you do this for everybody?

JOSEPH. For the ones who knock.

(A pause. Alex doesn't pull away.)

ALEX. Twenty-six years ago, did you do this too? For someone?

JOSEPH. Keep still.

(A long time. Then Joseph sets Alex's feet back down on the blanket, buttons up his shirt and goes back to the stove.)

SCENE 2

(Six thirty. The stove is roaring. Alex, still against the door, is fighting sleep. Joseph hums the tune from before, very low.)

ALEX. Stop that.

(He stops.)

ALEX. What is that tune?

JOSEPH. Nothing. A counting song.

ALEX. Counting what?

JOSEPH. What you don't want to hear.

ALEX. Sing it.

JOSEPH. I don't sing.

ALEX. You've been humming it for hours. Sing it.

(A pause. Joseph sings, very low, almost speaking.)

JOSEPH. One knock, it's the wind. Two knocks, it's the snow. Three knocks, it's the mountain...

(He stops. Silence.)

ALEX. ... rolling over to sleep.

(Joseph doesn't move.)

ALEX. Rolling over to sleep. How do I know that?

JOSEPH. I don't know.

ALEX. Where did you learn it?

JOSEPH. I made it up.

ALEX. When?

JOSEPH. One night.

(Alex slowly gets up and looks at the stove. The nail above it is empty.)

ALEX. The mitten. It was there before.

(Joseph unbuttons his shirt pocket. He takes out the red mitten and puts it in Alex's hand.)

ALEX. It's red.

JOSEPH. It was red.

ALEX. So was the one in the box. Red, with a white stripe at the wrist. A right hand.

(Alex turns the mitten over.)

ALEX. This one's the left.

(A long pause. From the same pocket, Joseph takes the folded paper and lays it on the table, in front of Alex.)

JOSEPH. I didn't burn it.

(Alex puts down the mitten, unfolds the sheet, reads.)

ALEX. "October fourteenth. Marthe Roux and Alex. From Les Granges. Time of arrival: eight p.m. Strong wind, snow."

JOSEPH. Underneath.

ALEX. There are big letters. The E is backward. "ALEX." And a drawing. A lamp. With blue all over it, in crayon, going over the lines.

JOSEPH. You wanted to sign like the grown-ups. She tried to hold your hand for the E. You wouldn't let her.

ALEX. I was here.

JOSEPH. On that bench, under the window. The blue lamp right above you.

ALEX. At my grandmother's. She told me: you were at your grandmother's.

JOSEPH. She told the police that too. Before daylight, I took you down through the Combes valley. You slept on my back. Down in the next valley, she caught the first bus. She told the police she'd been waiting for him down below. I came back up. I called the valley at noon, and said I'd just found him. Nobody ever knew you were here.

ALEX. Why were we here? Without him?

JOSEPH. Her lip was split open, here. One eye swollen shut. A bag packed in five minutes, her things and yours all jumbled together. She didn't tell me what happened. She said: he'll come. He knows where we are, he'll come. If he knocks, you don't open. Whatever he says, you don't open.

ALEX. And he came.

JOSEPH. At eleven. She was sitting on the floor, against that wall, hands over her ears. You were asleep. At the first knock, you opened your eyes. So I sat you on my knee, and I said: one knock, it's the wind. He knocked again. I said: two knocks, it's the snow. He was shouting your mother's name. Then he shouted yours, for a long time. So I sang louder. He knocked, I sang. I made up verses, the wind, the snow, the mountain, the marmots asleep, the stars counting along with us. In the end you fell back asleep. I kept going.

ALEX. For how long?

JOSEPH. Until there was nothing left to count.

(A long pause.)

ALEX. You could have opened. Afterward. When he stopped. An hour earlier, two hours earlier. He was thirty meters away. He'd taken his gloves off.

JOSEPH. Yes.

ALEX. Why didn't you go out?

JOSEPH. You were asleep on my knee. And I didn't know if he had really stopped.

ALEX. He was shouting my name.

JOSEPH. Yes.

ALEX. My father was shouting my name on the other side of that door, and you sang over him.

JOSEPH. Yes.

ALEX. Maybe he just wanted to see me. Maybe he was cold, maybe he was scared, maybe he'd have said he was sorry. You don't know. You didn't open, so you'll never know.

JOSEPH. I'll never know. For twenty-six years I haven't known. Every fourteenth of October, I stand behind that door, and I wonder what he would

have said if I'd slid back the bolt. And every time, come morning, I can still hear the blade in the wood.

ALEX. He was my father.

JOSEPH. He was your father. And her lip was split open.

(A pause.)

(Alex looks at the door, at the gashes.)

ALEX. He had his knife.

JOSEPH. He had his knife.

ALEX. She lied to me my whole life.

JOSEPH. She double-locked the door her whole life. It was the same door.

ALEX. "He didn't open up."

JOSEPH. No.

ALEX. She said it squeezing my wrist so hard it hurt.

(A pause.)

ALEX. It was her you were protecting. With your letter. "I alone am responsible."

JOSEPH. I didn't know she was dead. You told me tonight.

ALEX. And me?

JOSEPH. And you. I didn't want a judge to be the one who told you, with a file open in front of him, in a room full of chairs.

(Alex folds the sheet back up and slips it into a pocket with the mitten. Alex goes to the radio drawer, puts the flare gun inside, takes out a roll of tape.)

ALEX. It'll be light in an hour.

JOSEPH. What are you doing?

ALEX. I fix things. It's what I do.

SCENE 3

(Dawn. Gray light at the window; the lamp is still burning. The wind has

dropped. Joseph, alone, standing by the table, the letter in his hand. The door is not bolted.)

(A knock. Just one.)

(Joseph goes to the door and opens it at once. Alex comes in, snow on the shoulders, the wire cutters and the roll of tape in hand.)

ALEX. You didn't wait.

JOSEPH. No.

ALEX. It's fixed. It won't last the winter, but it'll hold this morning. Are you taking the helicopter?

JOSEPH. That's the plan.

ALEX. The plan was the pass.

(Joseph looks at the letter. He opens the stove door, throws it in, shuts it.)

(He goes to the radio, picks up the handset.)

JOSEPH. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges. Pierre Blanche to Les Granges.

(Static.)

JOSEPH. Yes, Hervé. It's me. The wind's dropped. You can send Bruno up.

(Static.)

JOSEPH. A flare? No. I didn't see a thing.

(Static.)

JOSEPH. No. Not alone.

(He looks at Alex.)

JOSEPH. There are two of us.

(Alex goes to the window and blows out the lamp.)



Rehearse this text with Acto

A voice gives you your cues, you learn it at your own pace, you test yourself.

acto.re/biblio

What you can do with it

Original text written for Acto. Read it, print it, work on it in class, perform it at an audition or on a self-tape: that is what it is for, and you need no permission. For a public performance or any commercial use, write to us at contact@acto.re.