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After the Crash

Written by Michel Bussi

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor

Published by Weidenfeld & Nicolson

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After the Crash

MICHEL BUSSI

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor

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23 December, 1980, 12.33 a.m.

The Airbus 5403, flying from Istanbul to Paris, suddenly plummeted. In a dive lasting less than ten seconds, the plane sank over three thousand feet, before stabilising once again. Most of the passengers had been asleep. They woke abruptly, with the terrifying sensation that they had nodded off while strapped to a rollercoaster.

Izel was woken not by the turbulence, but by the screaming. After nearly three years spent travelling the world with Turkish Airlines, she was used to a few jolts. She had been on a break, asleep for less than twenty minutes, and had scarcely opened her eyes when her colleague Meliha thrust her aged, fleshy bosom towards her.

'Izel? Izel? Hurry up! This is serious. There's a big storm outside. Zero visibility, according to the captain. You take one aisle and I'll take the other.'

Izel's face bore the weary expression of an experienced air hostess who wasn't about to panic over such a small thing. She got up from her seat, adjusted her suit, pulling slightly at the hem of her skirt, then moved towards the right-hand aisle.

The passengers were no longer screaming, and they looked more surprised than worried as the aeroplane continued to pitch. Izel went from one person to the next, calmly reassuring them: 'Everything's fine. Don't worry. We're just going through a little snowstorm over the Jura mountains. We'll be in Paris in less than an hour.'

Izel's smile wasn't forced. Her mind was already wandering

towards Paris. She would stay there for three days, until Christmas, and she was giddy with excitement at the prospect.

She addressed her words of comfort in turn to a ten-year-old boy holding tightly to his grandmother's hand, a handsome young businessman with a rumpled shirt, a Turkish woman wearing a veil, and an old man curled up fearfully with his hands between his knees. He shot her an imploring look.

'Everything's fine, honestly.'

Izel was calmly proceeding down the aisle when the Airbus lurched sideways again. A few people screamed. 'When do we start doing the loop-the-loop?' shouted a young man sitting to her right, who was holding a Walkman, his voice full of false cheer.

A trickle of nervous laughter was drowned out almost immediately by the screams of a young baby. The child was lying in a carrycot just a few feet in front of Izel – a little girl, only a few months old, wearing a white dress with orange flowers under a knitted beige jumper.

'No, madame,' Izel called out. 'No!'

The mother, sitting next to the baby, was unbuckling her belt so she could lean over to her daughter.

'No, madame,' Izel insisted. 'You must keep your seatbelt on. It's very important . . .'

The woman did not even bother turning around, never mind replying to the air hostess. Her long hair fell over the carrycot. The baby screamed even louder. Izel, unsure what to do, moved towards them.

The plane plunged again. Three seconds, maybe another 3,000 feet.

There were a few brief screams, but most of the passengers were silent. Dumbstruck. They knew now that the aeroplane's movements were not merely due to bad weather. Jolted by the dive, Izel fell sideways. Her elbow hit the Walkman, smashing it into the young guy's chest. She straightened up again immediately, not even taking the time to apologise. In front of her, the three-month-old girl was still crying. Her mother was leaning over her again, unbuckling the child's seatbelt.

'No, madame! No . . .'

Cursing, Izel tugged her skirt back down over her laddered tights. What a nightmare. She would have earned those three days of pleasure in Paris . . .

Everything happened very fast after that.

For a brief moment, Izel thought she could hear another baby crying, like an echo, somewhere else on the aeroplane, further off to her left. The Walkman guy's hand brushed her nylon-covered thighs. The old Turkish man had put one arm around his veiled wife's shoulder and was holding the other one up, as if begging Izel to do something. The baby's mother had stood up and was reaching over to pick up her daughter, freed now from the straps of the carrycot.

These were the last things Izel saw before the Airbus smashed into the mountainside.

The collision propelled Izel thirty feet across the floor, into the emergency exit. Her two shapely legs were twisted like those of a plastic doll in the hands of a sadistic child; her slender chest was crushed against metal; her left temple exploded against the corner of the door.

Izel was killed instantly. In that sense, she was luckier than most.

She did not see the lights go out. She did not see the aeroplane being mangled and squashed like a tin can as it crashed into the forest, the trees sacrificing themselves one by one as the Airbus gradually slowed.

And, when everything had finally stopped, she did not detect the spreading smell of kerosene. She felt no pain when the explosion ripped apart her body, along with those of the other twenty-three passengers who were closest to the blast.

She did not scream when flames filled the cabin, trapping the one hundred and forty-five survivors.

Eighteen Years Later

1

29 September, 1998, 11.40 p.m.

Now you know everything.

Crédule Grand-Duc lifted his pen and stared into the clear water at the base of the large vivarium just in front of him. For a few moments, his eyes followed the despairing flight of the Harlequin dragonfly that had cost him almost 2,500 francs less than three weeks ago. A rare species, one of the world's largest dragonflies, an exact replica of its prehistoric ancestor. The huge insect flew from one glass wall to another, through a frenzied swarm of dozens of other dragonflies. Prisoners. Trapped.

They all sensed they were dying.

Pen touched paper once again. Crédule Grand-Duc's hand shook nervously as he wrote.

In this notebook, I have reviewed all the clues, all the leads, all the theories I have found in eighteen years of investigation. It is all here, in these hundred or so pages. If you have read them carefully, you will now know as much as I do. Perhaps you will be more perceptive than me? Perhaps you will find something I have missed? The key to the mystery, if one exists. Perhaps . . .

For me, it's over.

The pen hesitated again, and was held trembling just an inch above the paper. Crédule Grand-Duc's blue eyes stared emptily into the still waters of the vivarium, then turned their gaze towards the fireplace where large flames were devouring a tangle of newspapers,

files and cardboard archive boxes. Finally, he looked down again and continued.

It would be an exaggeration to say that I have no regrets, but I have done my best.

Crédule Grand-Duc stared at this last line for a long time, then slowly closed the pale green notebook.

11.43 p.m.

He placed the pen in a pot on the desk, and stuck a yellow Post-it note to the cover of the notebook. Then he picked up a felt tip and wrote on the Post-it, in large letters, *for Lylie*. He pushed the notebook to the edge of the desk and stood up.

Grand-Duc's gaze lingered for a few moments on the copper plaque in front of him: CRÉDULE GRAND-DUC, PRIVATE DETECTIVE. He smiled ironically. Everybody called him Grand-Duc nowadays, and they had done for some time. Nobody – apart from Emilie and Marc Vitral – used his ludicrous first name. Anyway, that was before, when they were younger. An eternity ago.

Grand-Duc walked towards the kitchen. He took one last look at the grey, stainless-steel sink, the white octagonal tiles on the floor, and the pale wood cupboards, their doors closed. Everything was in perfect order, clean and tidy; every trace of his previous life had been carefully wiped away, as if this were a rented house that had to be returned to its owner. Grand-Duc was a meticulous man and always would be, until his dying breath. He knew that. That explained many things. Everything, in fact.

He turned and walked back towards the fireplace until he could feel the heat on his hands. He leaned down and threw two archive boxes into the flames, then stepped back to avoid the shower of sparks.

A dead end.

He had devoted thousands of hours to this case, examining each clue in the most minute detail. All those clues, those notes, all that research was now going up in smoke. Every trace of this investigation would disappear in the space of a few hours.

Eighteen years of work for nothing. His whole life was summarised in this *auto-da-fé*, to which he was the only witness.

11.49 p.m.

In fourteen minutes, Lylie would be eighteen years old, officially at least . . . Who was she? Even now, he still couldn't be certain. It was a one-in-two chance, just as it had been on that very first day. Heads or tails.

Lyse-Rose or Emilie?

He had failed. Mathilde de Carville had spent a fortune – eighteen years' worth of salary – for nothing.

Grand-Duc returned to the desk and poured himself another glass of Vin Jaune. From the special reserve of Monique Genevez, aged for fifteen years: this was, perhaps, the single good memory he had retained from this investigation. He smiled as he brought the glass of wine to his lips. A far cry from the caricature of the ageing alcoholic detective, Grand-Duc was more the type of man to dip sparingly into his wine cellar, and only on special occasions. Lylie's birthday, tonight, was a very special occasion. It also marked the final minutes of his life.

The detective drained the glass of wine in a single mouthful.

This was one of the few sensations he would miss: the inimitable taste of this distinctive yellow wine burning deliciously as it moved through his body, allowing him to forget for a moment this obsession, the unsolvable mystery to which he had devoted his life.

Grand-Duc put the glass back on the desk and picked up the pale green notebook, wondering whether to open it one last time. He looked at the yellow Post-it: *for Lylie*.

This was what would remain: this notebook, these pages, written over the last few days . . . For Lylie, for Marc, for Mathilde de Carville, for Nicole Vitral, for the police and the lawyers, and whoever else wished to explore this endless hall of mirrors.

It was a spellbinding read, without a doubt. A masterpiece. A thrilling mystery to take your breath away. And it was all there . . . except for the end.

He had written a thriller that was missing its final page, a whodunit in which the last five lines had been erased.

Future readers would probably think themselves cleverer than him. They would undoubtedly believe that they could succeed where he had failed, that they could find the solution.

For many years he had believed the same thing. He had always felt certain that proof must exist somewhere, that the equation could be resolved. It was a feeling, only a feeling, but it wouldn't go away . . . That certainty had been what had driven him on until this deadline: today, Lylie's eighteenth birthday. But perhaps it was only his subconscious that had kept this illusion alive, to prevent him from falling into utter despair. It would have been so cruel to have spent all those years searching for the key to a problem that had no solution.

The detective re-read his final words: *I have done my best*.

Grand-Duc decided not to tidy up the empty bottle and the used glass. The police and the forensics people examining his body a few hours from now would not be worried about an unwashed glass. His blood and his brains would be splashed in a thick puddle across this mahogany desk and these polished floorboards. And should his disappearance not be noticed for a while, which seemed highly likely (who would miss him, after all?), it would be the stench of his corpse that would alert the neighbours.

In the hearth, he noticed a scrap of cardboard that had escaped the flames. He bent down and threw it into the fire.

Slowly, Grand-Duc moved towards the mahogany writing desk that occupied the corner of the room facing the fireplace. He opened the middle drawer and took his revolver from its leather holster. It was a Mateba, in mint condition, its grey metal barrel glimmering in the firelight. The detective's hand probed more deeply inside the desk and brought out three 38mm bullets. With a practised movement he spun the cylinder and gently inserted the bullets.

One would be enough, even given his relatively inebriated state, even though he would probably tremble and hesitate. Because he would undoubtedly manage to press the gun to his temple, hold

it firmly, and squeeze the trigger. He couldn't miss, even with the contents of a bottle of wine in his bloodstream.

He placed the revolver on the desk, opened the left-hand drawer, and took out a newspaper: a very old and yellowed copy of *Est Républicain*. This macabre set-piece had been in his mind for months, a symbolic ritual that would help him to end it all, to rise above the labyrinth for ever.

11.54 p.m.

The detective glanced over at the vivarium, where the dragonflies were making their dirgelike rattles and hums. The power supply had been off for the last thirty minutes. Deprived of oxygen and food, the dragonflies would not survive the week. And he had spent so much money buying the rarest and oldest species; he had spent hours, years of his life, looking after the vivarium, feeding them, breeding them, even employing someone to look after them when he was away.

All that effort, just to let them die.

It's actually quite an agreeable feeling, Grand-Duc thought, to sit in judgement on the life and death of another: to protect only in order to condemn, to give hope in order to sacrifice. To play with fate, like a cunning, capricious god. After all, he too had been the victim of just such a sadistic deity.

Crédule Grand-Duc sat on the chair behind the desk and unfolded the copy of the *Est Républicain*, dated 23 December, 1980. Once again, he read the front page: 'The Miracle of Mont Terrible'.

Beneath the banner headline was a rather blurred photograph showing the carcass of a crashed aeroplane, uprooted trees, snow muddied by rescue workers. Under the photograph, the disaster was described in a few lines:

The Airbus 5403, flying from Istanbul to Paris, crashed into Mont Terri, on the Franco-Swiss border, last night. Of the 169 passengers and flight crew on board, 168 were killed upon impact or perished in the flames. The sole survivor was a baby, three months old, thrown from

the plane when it collided with the mountainside, before the cabin was consumed by fire.

When Grand-Duc died, he would fall forwards onto the front page of this newspaper. His blood would redden the photograph of the tragedy that had taken place eighteen years earlier, it would mingle with the blood of those one hundred and sixty-eight victims. He would be found this way, a few days or a few weeks later. No one would mourn him. Certainly not the de Carvilles. Perhaps the Vitrals would feel sad at his passing? Emilie, Marc . . . Nicole in particular.

He would be found, and the notebook would be given to Lylie: the story of her short life. His testament.

Grand-Duc looked at his reflection one more time in the copper plaque, and felt almost proud. It was a good ending: much better than what had gone before.

11.57 p.m.

It was time.

He carefully positioned the newspaper in front of him, moved his chair forward and took a firm grip of the revolver. His palms were sweaty. Slowly he lifted his arm.

He shivered, in spite of himself, when the cold metal of the gun barrel touched his temple. But he was ready.

He tried to empty his mind, not to think about the bullet, an inch or two from his brain, that would smash through his skull and kill him . . .

His index finger bent around the trigger. All he had to do now was squeeze and it would all be over.

Eyes open or closed?

A bead of sweat rolled down his forehead and fell onto the newspaper.

Eyes open. Now do it.

He leaned forward. For the final time, his gaze rested on the photograph of the burnt-out cabin, and the other photograph of the fireman standing in front of the hospital in Montbéliard,

carefully holding that bluish body. The miracle baby.

His index finger tightened around the trigger.

11.58 p.m.

His eyes were lost in the black ink of the newspaper's front page. Everything blurred. The bullet would perforate his temple, without the slightest resistance. All he had to do was squeeze a little harder, just a fraction of an inch. He stared into eternity. The black ink below him came into focus again, as if he were playing with the lens of a camera. This would be his final view of the world, before everything went dark for ever.

His finger. The trigger.

His eyes wide open.

Grand-Duc felt an electric shock run through him. Something unimaginable had just happened.

Because what he was looking at was impossible. He knew that perfectly well.

His finger relaxed its pressure slightly.

To begin with, Grand-Duc thought it must be an illusion, a hallucination provoked by his imminent death, some kind of defence mechanism dreamed up by his brain . . .

But no. What he had seen, what he read in that newspaper, was real. The paper was yellowed by age, the ink somewhat smeared, and yet there could be no doubt whatsoever.

It was all there.

The detective's mind started working frantically. He had come up with so many theories over the years of the investigation, hundreds of them. But now he knew where to begin, which thread to pull, the whole tangled web came apart with disconcerting simplicity.

It was all so obvious.

He lowered his pistol and laughed like a madman.

11.59 p.m.

He had done it!

The solution to the mystery had been here, on the front page of this newspaper, from the very beginning. And yet it had been absolutely impossible to discover this solution at the time, eighteen years ago. Everyone had read this newspaper, pored over it, analysed it thousands of times, but no one could possibly have guessed the truth, back in 1980, or during the years that followed.

The solution was so obvious: it jumped out at you . . . but on one condition.

The newspaper had to be looked at eighteen years later.