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Don't Let Go

Written by Michael Bussi

Translated from the French by Sam Taylor

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DON'T LET GO

Michel Bussi

Translated from the French
by Sam Taylor

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Fé lève lo mort...

*(‘It is dangerous to bring back the past’,
a proverb from Réunion)*

1

A Few Wet Footprints

Saint-Gilles-les-Bains, Réunion Island

Friday 29 March, 2013

3.01 p.m.

‘I’m just going up to the room for a second.’

Liane does not wait for a response, she simply tells her daughter and her husband, looking cheerful, radiant, as she moves away from the swimming pool.

Gabin, behind his bar, watches her with professional discretion. This week, Liane is by some distance the most beautiful woman in the Hotel Athena, yet she’s not the type of tourist who normally catches his eye. Petite, very slender, almost no breasts, but there’s something classy about her, a *je-ne-sais-quoi*. Maybe it’s her skin, still white with a bouquet of freckles starting to show on her lower back, just above her emerald and gold bikini bottoms. Or that sweet little rear, swaying gently as she walks, like green fruit in a treetop rocked by the wind. The woman walks barefoot across the lawn seemingly without bending a single blade of grass. Gabin watches her go past the deckchairs until she reaches the patio, half-hidden by a skinny palm tree. The last thing he saw – as he will tell Captain Purvi –

was the woman discreetly removing her bikini top; the fleeting vision of a bare back, a white breast, the hint of a nipple, before she grabbed her large beach towel and wrapped it around her.

3.03 p.m.

Naivo, standing behind his mahogany desk in the reception area, returns Liane's smile as best he can.

'Hello, mademoiselle...'

She walks across the crowded lobby, passing between a stand displaying postcards and a clothes rail filled with pareos and flowery shirts. Her blonde hair drips onto the towel covering her breasts. Naivo finds this attractive: those strapless shoulders, white, unmarked. The woman walks slowly, careful not to slip because she's barefoot. This is not normally allowed, but Naivo is not there to upset the tourists. Water still trickles down the woman's legs. A second later, she has disappeared towards the lifts, and all that remains of her is a few puddles. Like Amélie Poulain when she bursts into tears, Naivo suddenly thinks. He doesn't know why. But that is what he will always think, afterwards. For hours, whole nights, tortured by his memories. The fact that the woman vanished into thin air, literally evaporated. But he won't dare tell the police that. It's not the kind of thing they would understand.

3.04 p.m.

The lift swallows Liane. Second floor. It goes up to paradise and opens to a stunning view, displayed through the large picture windows: the south-facing swimming pool and, beyond it,

Ermitage Beach. Shaded by casuarina trees, the long golden crescent seems to stretch out forever, nibbled by the timid waves of the lagoon which are calmed by the distant coral reef.

'Watch out, it's wet!' Eva-Marie shouts at the lift, before she even knows who is going to step out.

Eve-Marie pulls a face. It's that blonde from number 38. Barefoot, of course. The woman in the towel pretends to be all shy and embarrassed with the junior staff, just the right amount of hypocrisy. She walks on tiptoe, over to the side, a good metre away from the bucket and the mop, apologising all the while.

'Never mind,' grumbles Eve-Marie, clutching her broom. 'Go on, I'll do it again once you've passed.'

'I'm so sorry, really...'

Sure you are, Eve-Marie murmurs to herself.

The blonde wiggles her behind as she minces like a ballerina, afraid of slipping on the wet tiles. More like an ice-skater than some little ballet dancer, Eve-Marie thinks. A triple axel in 30-degree heat in the tropics, now that would be something! Watched by the cleaning lady, the pretty woman brings one last slide under control and stops in front of her apartment door, number 38. She puts the key in the lock, enters, disappears.

All that remains of her are a few wet footprints on the perfectly clean tiles. And even these are already vanishing, as if the cold tiles have sucked the rest of her in, leaving the feet until last. Like a sort of high-tech quicksand, Eve-Marie thinks. Standing alone in the vast glass-walled corridor, she sighs. She still has to dust the pictures on the walls, watercolours of Les Hauts, Réunion's craggy interior, small islets, the ancient forest; the most beautiful parts of the island where tourists never set foot. With the windows to clean and the corridor to wash, she has enough work to keep her busy all afternoon. Normally, after the siesta, she's left in peace up on her floor. Nobody comes back up; they're

all out at the pool or the lagoon. All of them, except for the *katish*¹...

Eve-Marie wonders whether she should bother mopping up the girl's footprints. She'll undoubtedly come back out in a few minutes wearing a new bikini top because she wasn't getting a good enough tan with the other one.

¹ 'Pretty girl' in Réunion Creole.

2

Wave Goodbye

3.31 p.m.

Rodin's thing is taming the waves.

Using only his eyes.

And, contrary to what the drunks in the port of Saint-Gilles think, it is far from easy. It takes time. Patience. Cunning. It requires focus, a refusal to be distracted – by the sound of that car door slamming behind him, for example. Never look at the ground, always at the horizon.

The ocean is a crazy thing. Once, when he was young, Rodin went to a museum. Well, a sort of museum. In the north of France, near Paris, the house of some old guy who spent most of his day watching the reflection of the sun on the surface of a pond. Not even with waves, just water lilies. And this in a country where it's always cold, where the sky is so low you can almost touch it. It was the only time he ever left the island. It didn't make him want to do it again. In the museum next to the house there were some paintings – landscapes, sunsets, grey skies, a few of the sea. The most impressive ones were a good two metres wide and three metres tall. There was a crowd of people there, women mostly, old women, who seemed able to stand in front of a canvas for hours.

Strange.

The sound of another car door behind him. Using only his ears, he measures the direction and the distance; the car park by the port, thirty metres from the end of the pier where he sits on his rock. Probably a tourist who thinks he can capture the waves with his camera, like a fisherman who hopes to catch a fish just by standing in the water for a second. Idiots...

He thinks again about that bearded maniac. When it comes down to it, those painters are just like him really, trying to capture the light, waves, movement. But why burden yourself with canvases and paintbrushes? All you have to do is sit here, by the sea, and look. He is aware that some people on the island think he's mad to spend the whole day just staring at the horizon. But he's no madder than those old women standing in front of their paintings. In fact, he's less mad because he doesn't have to pay for the privilege. This view is free, a gift from the brilliant and generous painter who lives up there.

A muffled cry disturbs the silence behind him. A sort of groan. The tourist must be feeling ill...

Rodin does not turn around. To understand the sea, to fathom its rhythm, you must remain immobile. Barely even breathing. The waves are like nervous squirrels: one false move and they'll run away... The girl at the unemployment office asked him what kind of work he was looking for, his aptitudes, his plans, his skills. He told her he knew how to talk to the waves, to recognise and tame them, so to speak. He then asked the girl, quite seriously, what kind of job he could do with that. Something in research, perhaps? Something cultural? People are interested in bizarre things, after all. She had stared at him wide-eyed, as if she thought he was making fun of her. She was pretty cute; he would have liked to bring her here to the pier and introduce her to the waves. He often does that with his great-nephews. They

understand. Well, a bit.

Less and less, though.

The scream explodes behind him. It is not just a groan this time. It's clearly a cry for help.

Rodin turns around. The spell has been broken anyway; it would take him hours to enter into communion again.

His face turns pale.

He glimpses a car, a black 4x4. And a shadow too, stocky, almost wider than he is tall, dressed in a kurta, the person's face concealed by a strange khaki cap. A Malbar², undoubtedly.

Rodin stutters. When he spends too much time with the waves, he has trouble finding his words. It takes him a moment to speak again.

'Excuse m... I wan...'

He cannot look away from the knife in the Malbar's hand, the red blade. He makes no move to defend himself. And really, the only thing he would have liked is to have had the time to turn back to the sea and say goodbye to the waves, the light, the horizon. He doesn't care about anything else. But the Malbar doesn't even give him the chance to do that.

Rodin sees the 4x4's open boot. An arm, half-covered in a sheet, dangling from it. A...

Everything goes blurred.

One hand grips his shoulder while another stabs the knife into his heart.

² A non-Muslim inhabitant of Réunion, of Indian origin.

3

The Empty Room

4.02 p.m.

The sun hangs above the swimming pool like a huge halogen bulb fastened there for eternity. The neat jungle of palm trees and octopus bushes, cloistered by three high teak walls, protects the enclosed space from even the faintest breath of wind. You can guess at the ocean's presence from the tropicbirds flying above, the cooling influence of the distant trade winds. But in the garden of the Hotel Athena, the heat beats down on the square of lawn and the few tourists escape it by diving into the chlorinated water then lying on the deckchairs lined up in shady corners.

'I'm going to see what Liane's doing.'

Martial levers himself up from the pool with his arms. Gabin sees him approaching. Liane's husband isn't bad either, it has to be said, with his muscular legs, his six-pack, his broad shoulders. He looks like a PE teacher, or a fireman, or a soldier, one of those professions where you're paid to spend your days pumping iron. Perfectly tanned too, in contrast to his wife's milky skin. Less than a week they've been here, and already he looks like a Cafre³... The handsome Martial must have a drop of black blood, just the tiniest

³ A person from Réunion of African origin.

chromosome from a slave ancestor, a dormant pigment that only needs a bit of sunlight to allow it to percolate through, the way a single drop of Blue Curaçao can colour a cocktail.

As the tourist moves towards the bar, Gabin watches the water running down his hairless chest. Martial and Liane Bellion make a beautiful couple, playing at lazing around in the tropics. Sexy and rich. Good for them, thinks Gabin. Win-win. The happiness of wealthy white lovers is fundamental to commerce in destinations that are supposedly paradise.

Their bizness..

Martial is standing in front of him.

‘Gabin, has my wife come back down?’

‘No, sorry, I haven’t seen her...’

Gabin glances at the clock behind him. It is over an hour since Liane went upstairs. And one thing’s for sure: if her sweet little ass had wandered back into his line of vision, he would have remembered. Martial turns around, and walks a few feet towards the bodies splashing around in the pool.

‘Margaux, can you look after Sopha? I’m going to see what Liane’s doing.’

Gabin registers every detail of the scene with a precision he is not, at that moment, aware of. The exact time on the clock. The position of those around him, in the water, sitting on the edge of the pool, or lying back in deckchairs. The police will make him repeat his description ten times, sketching the scene just to be sure. Not once will he contradict himself.

Margaux, swimming lengths in the pool, barely even looks up; Margaux is half of another couple; the wife of Jacques, the lawyer who is sitting reading on his deckchair. Or sleeping.

‘You know, Captain Purvi,’ Gabin will say apologetically, ‘it’s hard to tell when they’re wearing sunglasses...’

Margaux and Jacques Jourdain are a less glamorous couple

than Liane and Martial, and at least ten years older. More annoying, too. He spends most of his time on the computer in the lobby, reading his emails, while she just swims from one end of the pool to the other. She swims for kilometres. Given that the pool is twelve metres long, that's a frightening number of lengths. Worse than a tailless tenrec⁴ caught under a crate by kids in Les Hauts. The Jourdaines are bored shitless, even in the tropics. Gabin doesn't want to imagine what they must be like in Paris...

Sopha is Liane and Martial's daughter. Well, Sopha is what they call her; her real name is Josapha. In the pool, she whimpers as though she might actually sink, even with those Dora the Explorer water wings around her arms. Gabin spotted the little blond girl's tyrannical temperament on the very first day, as if the kid had decided her sole duty during this holiday was to ruin it for her parents. She's gifted, or something like that. Barely six years old and already blasé. How many Parisian girls of her age have ever swum in thirty-degree water under the shade of casuarina trees, with fluorescent coral and clownfish slipping between their toes?

While Gabin pontificates to himself about this spoiled only child, Martial has slipped into the hotel.

4.05 p.m.

All Naivo can remember seeing is Martial Bellion's back as he stood in front of the lift. He must have been looking elsewhere when Bellion came through the lobby, or was immersed in his accounts. But it was definitely him, no doubt about it. Same swimming trunks, same back, same hair. It won't be easy to

⁴ A small hedgehog native to the island.

explain this to the police, but yes, it is perfectly possible to recognise a man from behind.

4.06 p.m.

‘It’s all right, go ahead, that bit’s OK!’ Eve-Marie shouts at Martial, who hesitates at the sight of the spotlessly clean tiles. ‘It’s dry!’

Through the immaculate windows on the second floor, Martial glances down at the hotel garden. Sopha is sitting at the edge of the pool, alone. Margaux looks up at her every three strokes. Martial sighs, then walks over towards number 38.

He knocks softly on the dark wooden door. He waits. Knocks again. After a few seconds, he turns around and explains to Eve-Marie, who has not said a word:

‘My wife has the keys... I don’t think she can hear me. I’m going to ask the guy at reception to open it for me...’

Eve-Marie shrugs. What does she care? The floor’s dry now.

Martial returns a few moments later, flanked by Naivo, who plays St Peter with a massive bunch of keys chiming at his wrist. Eve-Marie rolls her eyes. It’s like a carnival in her corridor this afternoon! Naivo is a methodical man: the first key he inserts in the lock opens the door to number 38.

Martial goes in. Naivo stands on the threshold, a metre behind him.

The room is empty.

Martial takes another step forward, disoriented.

‘I don’t understand. Liane should be here...’

Naivo puts a hand on the doorframe. A shiver runs through his arm. Something is wrong here: he sensed it instantly. While Martial scans the room’s few recesses, Naivo’s eyes fix on every

detail. The double bed, with the fuchsia duvet rolled in a ball. The scattered clothes. The cushions and the remote control on the carpet. The white glass vase knocked off the roble-wood shelf. All clues pointing to a violent domestic quarrel.

Or to a passionate fuck between consenting lovers, thinks Naivo, forcing himself to be more positive.

Frantic, Martial opens the bathroom door.

Nobody there.

Not in this room, or anywhere else. There is no balcony, no space under the bed in which she could hide, no cupboard with doors that close, only wooden shelving.

Martial sits on the bed, looking devastated, lost. And yet, bizarrely, Naivo does not believe him. He won't really know how to express this to the police, but something in Bellion's reaction does not seem natural. He will simply describe the scene to Captain Purvi, describe this handsome, self-assured, 40-year-old father collapsing like a child when he found the room empty. This playboy in his trunks sitting like a statue on the edge of the bed. Perhaps that was what struck him as surreal in the moment it happened. The contrast...

The contrast... and the red stains...

Sweat pours down Naivo's forehead.

Red stains on the bedsheet.

Naivo stares. A dozen other red stains are spread across the beige carpet, around the bed, near the window, on the curtains. He falls silent. All he can see now is a room splattered with blood.

Indecision.

The moment seems to stretch, though in reality it lasts no more than a few seconds. Martial stands up, silent, and stalks around the room, throwing the clothes from the bed as if searching for an explanation, a note, some kind of clue. Naivo

senses Eve-Marie staring over his shoulder. She has walked towards them, cloth in hand so she has an excuse. The cloth is the same turquoise colour as the scarf she wears in her hair.

Martial stands up straight and finally speaks, in a toneless voice, as he picks up the vase and puts it back on the wooden shelf.

‘I don’t understand. Liane should be here...’

Naivo’s gaze alights on the clothes he has thrown in a pile at the foot of the bed. T-shirts, cropped trousers, shirts.

All of them men’s clothes!

Immediately, a door opens inside Naivo’s brain, and a breeze blows through, sweeping away his morbid theories.

The girl has run away...

He could testify as an expert witness: Liane Bellion wears a different dress practically every hour of the day. You’d have thought her Corsair flight was accompanied by a cargo ship full of her clothes that were unloaded at the port. And yet, in this ravaged apartment, there is not a single trace of any lace knickers, frilled skirts or pareos, any skin-tight tops or low-cut camisoles...

Naivo is breathing more easily. He has forgotten about the blood.

‘I don’t believe it,’ Martial hisses, examining once more the two square metres of the bathroom.

‘Monsieur Bellion,’ says Naivo, ‘Can I do anything?’

Martial turns on his heel and speaks quickly, as if he had prepared his response in advance, learned it by heart.

‘Call the police! My wife should be in this room. She came up here an hour ago. She didn’t come back down.’ He slams the bathroom door and says: ‘So yes, you can do something. Get me the police.’

Ever the professional, Naivo suppresses a worried frown. Calling the police to the hotel... The boss is not going to be happy

about that. Between the *chik*⁵ and the thousand-euro-plus cost of a flight from Paris, tourism is already suffering here. So the idea of having the police walking round the swimming pool, of every guest being interrogated, of blue flashing lights... No, the boss is not going to like that at all. But what choice does he have?

‘Of course, monsieur,’ Naivo hears himself say. ‘I’ll go down now and call them.’

His eyes meet Eve-Marie’s, and a wordless flicker of understanding passes between them. Then he takes one last look at Martial. The man is prowling the room like a caged animal. The air conditioning is making all his muscles shiver, like a surfer lost on the Baltic Sea.

‘You should put some clothes on, monsieur.’

He cannot tell if the guest has even heard him.

‘This... this is not normal,’ Martial Bellion whispers again. ‘Liane should have been here.’

⁵ The chikungunya virus.

4

Return to the Athena

5.07 p.m.

Captain Aja Purvi curses as she slams on the brakes of her Peugeot 206. Just before the Cap de la Marianne tunnel, one of the two lanes of the coast road is closed off with an interminable row of orange cones.

Roadworks!

The tunnel entrance resembles a vast black mouth, slowly sucking in a necklace of multi-coloured metal sheeting. The 206 crawls forward for another ten metres or so, then stops behind a 4x4, level with a red pickup truck.

Irritated, Aja checks the clock on the dashboard.

How long will it take to drive the eight kilometres that separate her from the Hotel Athena? Thirty minutes? An hour? More?

Suppressing her fury, Aja stares out at the waves of the Indian Ocean crashing against the rocky outcrop that is supposed to look like Marianne in profile. Hmm... Aja has never been able to see the resemblance between this block of basalt and the symbol of the French Republic. They'd have been better off just blasting the thing with dynamite than spending billions on the Route des Tamarins, a few hundred metres higher up, a blot on the

landscape that will not solve any of the island's traffic problems. All it will do is foster the illusion that an endless number of cars can continue to be registered here, thirty thousand new ones every year, *ad infinitum*. What they really ought to do is just face the truth: Réunion Island is a mountain that has grown out of the sea. Almost its entire population is crammed around the edges, and they all travel by car along the narrow, flat-ish strip of land between the ocean and the lower slopes of the volcanoes, going round and round in circles, no more free than protons in a cyclotron. A particle decelerator – the islanders are testing the concept.

Aja switches off the engine with a sigh of resignation. The man in the next car stares down at her from his pickup. A Cafre in a white T-shirt, his arm dangling from the truck's open window. This adds to Aja's annoyance. If she'd taken the gendarmerie's Jumper, or if she had a blue flashing light to put on the roof of her 206, she'd get past this crowd of vehicles in a few minutes; they would part for her like the Red Sea, including that Cafre, who is twisting his neck so he can get a good view of her cleavage... Unconsciously, Aja pulls the seams of her blouse together. Sometimes guys like that make her want to wear the veil, just to piss them off.

After all, when it's thirty degrees, a baseball cap is obviously a better option than a *chador*...

Or a policewomen's cap...

But the Athena's manager, Armand Zuttor, had been very insistent on that point.

'Keep it discreet, eh, Aja? Whatever you do, don't go scaring off the tourists!'

That Gros Blanc⁶ hotel manager knew her when she was a

⁶ Literally, '*Fat White Man*', a name given to island inhabitants from mainland France who have retained the wealth they gained

child and came to the Athena with her parents, and he still talks to her with the same familiarity he did then. But Aja is no fool: she knows there is a fine line between affection and humiliation.

'This is a private affair, Aja, you understand, not an official investigation. Martial Bellion does not wish to press charges against anyone. Just come and see him, reassure him about his wife. I'm asking if you'll do this for me as a favour.'

A favour? Incognito? Anything else? But how can she refuse? Tourism represents 80 per cent of employment in Saint-Gilles. Two hundred people work in hotels here, more than thirty of them in the Athena alone.

According to Armand Zuttor, there is no cause for alarm. This is a simple domestic case: a Parisian couple on holiday, the wife going off with her suitcase, leaving the husband alone by the pool like an idiot, with a six-year-old kid on his hands.

'Funny, isn't it, Aja? If this had happened to a creole, everyone would just have laughed. Even if it was a Zoreille⁷. But a tourist... and then the husband won't face facts, won't admit that his little bird has simply flown away. He was the one who insisted we call the cops, that you get your arses over here straight away... You understand?'

Aja understands. And so the captain of the Saint-Paul gendarmerie had got in her car as fast as a fireman at the first hint of smoke appearing at the top of the Fournaise volcano.

Now here she is, stuck in traffic. At a standstill: no one is entering or leaving the tunnel at all. Aja sighs and restlessly opens the driver-side window. The air is oppressive, not a breath of wind. Tyre-meltingly hot. The sound of a séga⁸ song flits over the

during colonial days.

⁷ Someone from mainland France who lives permanently on Réunion.

⁸ A kind of music and dance from the island.

motionless row of cars, emanating from the pickup's radio. The Cafre drums along to the rhythm with his ring-covered fingers, no doubt waiting for the Radio Freedom presenter to list all the kilometres of traffic jams on the island, while reminding his already depressed listeners that there are no alternative routes.

Aja throws her head back against the headrest. She wishes she could just leave the car here and walk to the hotel. The Cafre seems unfazed by the traffic jam. In fact, he almost appears to be enjoying it. After all, he has music, sunshine, the sea... and a girl to ogle at.

As if he had nothing better to do with his day...

5.43 p.m.

Martial Bellion stands opposite Aja Purvi. He is very pale, the captain notes. She's the one who's been sweltering in the sun for the past hour, her arse stuck to the leatherette seat of her 206, and yet it is the tourist who is sweating buckets, despite the air-conditioned cool of the hotel lobby. As soon as she came in, he stood up from his plastic, imitation-wicker chair.

'Captain Purvi?'

His mouth was open, as if he were gasping for air; it made him look like the exotic fish in the aquarium behind him.

'I... I apologise for disturbing you, Captain. I'm sure that, for a police officer such as yourself, a disappearance like this must seem very ordinary, unremarkable... But...how can I put this? I'm sorry, Captain, I'm not making myself very clear... What I mean to say is that, despite how it seems, there... there is...'

Aja tries to look sympathetic while Martial wipes his dripping forehead with his open shirt. He has only been speaking for a few seconds, and Bellion has already apologised twice. She

finds it strange, this feeling of guilt, particularly at odds with his handsome face, the muscular pectorals visible beneath his Blanc du Nil shirt. What does he have to feel so guilty about?

Bellion sucks in air as if he's about to go for some kind of world record, then says in a gush of words:

'Captain, let me start again. I'm not stupid, I know everyone must think that my wife has just left me. Obviously... There's no lack of temptation here, on this island. But listen, Captain, I'm sure that's not what's happened... She wouldn't have left like that. Not without her daughter... Not without...'

Aja suddenly interrupts Martial's stammering.

'OK, Monsieur Bellion. There's no need to justify yourself. We're going to do everything we possibly can. You're lucky: Armand Zuttor takes very good care of his customers. The police force is all part of the service, ensuring the safety of the guests. Don't worry, I will investigate your wife's disappearance, as discreetly as possible...'

'Do you want to...'

Martial's linen shirt is sticking to his skin. Transparent with sweat. Aja smiles and turns to look at the yellow tang bossing the other fish around in the aquarium. There is something in this tourist's behaviour that continues to intrigue her.

'Listen, Monsieur Bellion, it's too late today, but you should come to the police station in Saint-Gilles tomorrow to make an official report of your wife's disappearance. You'll be required to show your ID, and to fill out a few forms. In the meantime, I'll see what I can do. Do you have a photograph of your wife?'

'Of course.'

He hands her the picture. Aja observes the impeccable oval of Liane Bellion's face, the cascade of blond hair, the fine white teeth. A pureblood! She is well aware that such a girl would stimulate desire in a racial melting pot like Réunion. Aja purses her lips

sympathetically.

‘Thank you, Monsieur Bellion. Armand Zuttor has already given me the essential details. Stay in the lobby or in the hotel garden, have a beer or a glass of rum – it’ll do you good – but don’t go up to your room yet, and don’t touch anything. I’ll come back to you in a few minutes.’

5.46 p.m.

Gabin watches Aja walk around the edge of the swimming pool and approach the bar. The Captain slaps the photograph on the counter.

‘A beautiful girl like that in the hotel, I assume you must have noticed her, Gabin?’

The barman takes his time before replying. Usually, the eyes of the customers who stand on the other side of the bar sweep past him to the impressive collection of flavoured rums that fill sweet jars over three shelves, like brightly coloured potions in an apothecary’s window. Aja, on the other hand, stares straight into his eyes. She couldn’t care less about the rum. Like most Zarabes⁹, she doesn’t drink alcohol. Not for lack of trying on Gabin’s part: many times, when Aja was a teenager, waiting for her mother and father by the edge of the pool, he would offer her a drink, just to taste. That was before the tragedy, of course.

As Aja is looking into his eyes, Gabin does the same to her. The head of the Saint-Gilles police force is quite a rare flower on the island. A Zarabe with creole blood. Gabin has a fairly specific opinion on Zarabes, who rarely interbreed, generally preferring not to share their genes or their bank accounts with any other

⁹ A Muslim inhabitant, of Indian origin.

race. Discreet and efficient. Twenty-five thousand people, thirteen mosques, and no niqabs, veils or other outward signs... and they own every fabric, car and hardware business on the island.

Aja's Zarabe blood comes from her father, the creole from her mother. Would he categorise her as pretty? Gabin wonders. Not an easy decision. Sometimes interbreeding produces masterpieces of universal beauty, but more often the results are like an interesting experiment. Aja is a case in point: a somewhat improbable combination of long black hair, blue almond-shaped eyes, and thick black eyebrows that almost meet above her nose. There's potential for prettiness there, Gabin concludes, but in order to realise it, the Captain would have to smile occasionally. He'd also have to see what she looks like in a bikini, which doesn't seem likely to happen. Aja is from the Hauts de Saint-Paul, the hilly interior of the island, from one of those squalid apartment buildings on the Plateau Caillou. He's known her since she was in secondary school. Even then, Aja acted like a *margouillat*¹⁰ in a class of *endormis*¹¹. Blessed with a rare level of intelligence, she was one of those studious types who never went out in the sun or swam in the lagoon, but spent all of her time working, working, working. Like many others from the island, Aja went to university in France. She studied Law at Panthéon-Assas, then went to police academy at Chateaulin, in Brittany. Top of her class. But unlike most of the super-intelligent kids from the island, she came back. Maybe she regrets that slightly now? It's not easy for someone of mixed race to climb the ladder of power here, and Aja got stuck with the local police squad at Saint-Gilles-les-Bains. But Gabin has seen her at work: she's tenacious, ambitious, gutsy, capable of making it all the way to the top. And her thirst for vengeance gives her added motivation. The Zoreilles of Saint-Denis will have

¹⁰ Lizard.

¹¹ Chameleons.

trouble keeping her muzzled for long...

Aja waves the photograph in front of his face impatiently.

‘So?’

‘So, what? I don’t remember hearing any sirens, Aja. I take it this isn’t an official investigation?’

‘Well, you know us cops. We won’t get out of bed for a creole who’s been beaten up by her husband. But a tourist who runs off...’

Gabin gives a wide, toothy smile.

‘You’re learning the art of diplomacy, Aja, that’s good...’

Aja does not reply – she appears to be thinking about this – but then she asks him again.

‘So, what do you know about the *tantine*¹²?’

‘Hardly anything, my sweet. You know me: I just stand here behind my bar like a palm tree. I saw the girl walk past the deckchairs, take off her bikini top, wrap herself up in a towel, and then – *poof!* – she vanished into thin air. You should ask Naivo, on reception. He’s new, you can’t miss him: he’s Madagascan, looks like a lemur in a shirt and tie. He was the one who opened the door of the room for Bellion.’

5.51 p.m.

Aja enters the lobby. No sign of Martial Bellion. He must have taken her advice and made himself scarce so that she can get on with the investigation. Suddenly she smiles: Gabin wasn’t exaggerating, the guy at reception really does look like a lemur. Naivo is sitting behind his desk, round brown eyes like marbles, a crown of stiff grey hair stretching from one ear to the other; he is

¹² Girlfriend.

wearing a black and white striped tie, as if he's wrapped his own tail around his neck.

And this lemur is not insensitive to the charms of a blonde. As soon as she waves the photograph of Liane in front of his bulging eyes, he suddenly becomes loquacious.

'Yes, Captain Purvi, I saw Liane Bellion go up to her room this afternoon. Yes, her husband came to fetch me to help him open the door to number 38. How long afterwards? I'd say about an hour. That poor guy looked so worried, panic-stricken in fact, standing there in his trunks and flip-flops. So I opened the door for him and the room was...how can I put this?... in a state of some disorder. There were signs of a struggle. Or a shared siesta between a man and a woman, if you know what I mean, Captain...'

One of those hazel marbles vanishes behind the salt-and-pepper forest of an eyebrow. The lemur version of a wink, Aja supposes.

'Except,' Naivo continues. 'Except that all the women's clothing had disappeared. You can trust me: I have an eye for that sort of thing. Liane Bellion had packed her suitcase.'

Another bizarre wink.

'But that was not the most important thing, Captain. The most important thing was that there were traces of... how shall I put this?'

Aja's eyes narrow. She has a feeling she isn't going to like what he says next. The lemur looks up at her again.

'Stains that looked very much like bloodstains.'

Aja nods, impassive.

'Let's go upstairs, if that's OK with you. You can show me the room...'

They take the lift. Second floor. Aja glances out through the bay windows at the hotel guests drinking cocktails and talking around

the pool beneath the crimson sky; the women's bare backs, the wreaths of smoke, the kids splashing in the fluorescent water coloured blue, red and green by the underwater lights.

A tropical evening. Perfectly calm. Like paradise. Armand Zuttor was right: flashing blue lights would have been out of place here.

Naivo searches through the keys in his hand and moves towards room 38. He looks like a zookeeper about to open the cage of agorilla.

'Captain, may I talk to you?'

The voice seems to come out of nowhere. Aja turns around and sees an old woman standing behind her, holding a broom. The creole, who came up behind her so stealthily, speaks again:

'You are Captain Purvi? Little Aja? Laila and Rahim's daughter?'

Aja doesn't know what irritates her more. The reference to her childhood from a woman she doesn't recognise, or the lazy rhythm of the cleaning lady's speech. She gives a vague nod.

'I see your mother often, you know, my little Aja,' the creole woman continues. 'At the covered market in Saint-Paul, practically every other day. We talk about the past the way old women do.'

Aja forces a smile.

'Go on...'

The lemur has not moved. Nor has the creole. Stalemate.

'Can we talk alone?' she says.

'OK,' Aja agrees, turning towards Naivo.

The lemur's eyes open wide with indignation but he reluctantly moves away to the other end of the corridor. The creole woman with the broom seems to be searching for words. Aja waits for a few seconds, then interjects:

'How long have you been here?'

'Thirty years and six months, my little Aja.'

Aja sighs.

'I mean this afternoon, madame. How long have you been up here, in this corridor.'

Eve-Marie smiles, slowly checks her watch, then replies.

'Four hours and thirty minutes.'

'That's a long time, isn't it?'

'Well, let's just say it's not usually this busy on my floor...'

Aja looks at the tiles, the walls, the paintings, the windows, all of it as impeccably clean as a hospital corridor. The cleaning lady's first name is embroidered on her jacket.

'Eve-Marie, you seem like a precise, organised kind of person to me. Tell me exactly what happened in your corridor this afternoon.'

The old woman takes forever to lean the broom against the wall.

'Well, Naivo and the husband came up here around four o'clock to open the door to number 38. The room was empty and...'

Eve-Marie slowly adjusts the scarf in her frizzy hair. To speed things up, Aja takes control of the conversation once more.

'All right, Eve-Marie, so Martial Bellion came up here at four. Liane Bellion came up an hour earlier, about three o'clock. It's what happened in between that interests me. If you didn't leave your corridor, you must have seen Madame Bellion come out of her room.'

Eve-Marie has spotted some invisible mark on the closest window, and she rubs at it with the corner of a turquoise cloth. It seems like an eternity before she replies:

'I saw people come through this corridor between three and four... But not the blonde...'

The words are like a hammer blow to the back of her head.

‘What do you mean?’ Aja almost shouts. ‘Liane Bellion didn’t come back out of her room?’

Again Eve-Marie takes her time to answer, slowly folding the cloth in four. The suspense builds. This woman should write thrillers.

‘The husband came up.’

‘One hour later. Yes, I know.’

‘No, not one hour later. Long before that. I would say about fifteen minutes after his wife came up.’

Another hammer blow. To the chest, this time.

‘Are you certain?’

‘Oh yes, my little Aja, you can trust me. No one comes through my corridor without me noticing them.’

‘I don’t doubt it, Eve-Marie. Please go on.’

Eve-Marie shoots a suspicious glance at Naivo. The lemur is pacing around in front of the lifts. The creole woman lowers her voice.

‘He went into the room. At the time, I thought he just wanted to have a bit of fun with his wife. After all, it was the siesta and the kid was downstairs with their friends. The husband came out of the room a few minutes later, ten minutes at most. He approached me, and asked me to do him a favour.’

Aja observes her reflection in the window. Her blue eyes blend into the fluorescent glimmer of the swimming pool, four metres below.

‘A favour?’

Eve-Marie takes forever to turn around to face the cart that contains her bin, her cleaning products and her brushes.

‘Yes, a favour. He asked if he could borrow my cart. Not this one, but the big one, the one I keep all the towels and sheets in. It was empty. He went into the room with it, and came out two minutes later, and took the lift... then he just disappeared. I found

my cart downstairs, on level -1, near the car park. It may seem strange to you, my little Aja... But we don't refuse the customers anything here.'

The Captain rests her trembling hand on the window ledge.

'The laundry cart... Did he tell you why on earth he wanted it?'

'Well, you know, we don't ask the guests questions here. *La lang na pwin le zo*¹³.'

Aja chews her lip.

'Did anyone else go in? Or come out? Was there anyone else in the corridor this afternoon?'

'No one! You can believe me, Aja. The *katish* from 38 never left her room.'

And why wouldn't she believe Eve-Marie?

'Your laundry cart. How big is it?'

Eve-Marie seems to think about this.

'Well,, there's a sign on it saying it can carry up to 180 kilos of laundry. I can see what you're thinking, Aja. Between you and me, I'd be surprised if the little blonde in her bikini weighed more than half of that.'

While Eve-Marie's gaze finds more invisible specks of dust, Aja stares down at the garden. There are no more than twenty people there, chatting, drinking, waiting for the sunset. Aja spots Martial Bellion under a lamppost. He is sitting in a tall chair, a little girl of six on his knees.

His wife never came out of the room...

Naivo mentioned signs of a struggle. And bloodstains.

So much for the nice, reassuring theory that Liane Bellion went off with a lover somewhere...

¹³ A Réunion proverb: 'the tongue has no bones', meaning that one should be careful what one says.

Noticing that their conversation is over, the lemur advances down the corridor, keys in hand. Aja will have to explain to him, and to the hotel manager, that the nature of the case has changed. Armand Zuttor is not going to like it> There is every chance that the clothes scattered across room 38 now form pieces of evidence from a crime scene. Aja glances down at her watch. Ideally, they should search for fingerprints tonight, analyse the bloodstains, test samples for DNA, and all the rest of the protocol.

Now she will just have to convince Christos to get off his arse...