

Pascal Garnier

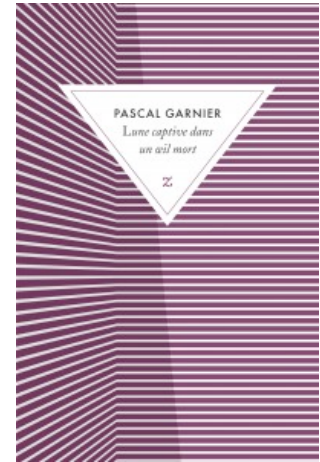
Lune captive dans un œil mort (*Moon Caught in Dead Eye*)

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TRANSLATED FROM FRENCH
BY IAN MONK

Biography: Born in 1949 in Paris, Pascal Garnier spent his teenage years globetrotting. His first two books, *L'Année sabbatique* and *Un chat comme moi*, were published in 1986. An exponent of short texts, but also the author of novels and children's books, Pascal Garnier is both a prolific and varied author who is unexcelled when it comes to depicting insipid characters leading dull existences. But his lucid pen never becomes over-sharp or mean. "A new presence in the landscape of the *roman noir*" (*L'Humanité*), Pascal Garnier now lives in Lyon, where he continues to paint and write.

Publications: Among his most recent books from Zulma: *La Théorie du Panda*, 2008; *Comment va la douleur ?*, 2006 (paperback edition, LGF, "Le livre de poche", 2008); *La Solution Esquimau*, 2006 ; *Flux*, 2005; *Les Hauts du bas*, 2003 (paperback edition, LGF, "Le livre de poche", 2009).

Summary

Martial and Odette have allowed themselves to be persuaded by an estate agent specialising in senior citizens' residences. They have left their grey suburb for a little tailor-made "paradise" in the south of France, and are now pioneers at *Les Conviviales*, a sort of perpetual holiday camp made up of identically-designed detached houses, but which provides the greatest comfort of all: "feeling protected and in permanent security".

A new life begins for Odette and Martial. But soon, glitches in the security system add to the tedium of their solitude. Their first neighbours, Maxime and Marlène, move in at last, followed by a lone woman, who is not what she seems. The club-house entertainment manager, who is a bit of an old hippie, can at last get to work.

Before long, this self-contained universe turns into an explosive cocktail shaker, while the eternal world, with its nomads and creatures of the night, becomes all the more terrorising to our residents for being kept outside. One and all lose their cool. Especially when the janitor beats a cat to death with a spade or when the slightest thunderstorm paralyses the security system.

Such disturbing obsessions and concealed traumas build up until, one night more terrible than ever, the moon is seen reflected in the janitor's right eye, which has been ripped out by a stray bullet...

Extract

LES CONVIVIALES is *the* expert in senior citizen residences

Les Conviviales is a new lifestyle concept for retired people who have chosen to live out an active retirement in the sun ...

In brief, Les Conviviales means:

AN ENCLOSED, SECURE RESIDENCE

Nowadays, the greatest of all comforts is to feel well-protected and in permanent security. The janitor-steward who is present all year round is there to watch over the residents' peace and quiet.

Martial compared the photo on the cover of the brochure with the scene through the window. It was raining. It had rained nearly every day for the past month. The rain was greening over the Roman tiles of the rigorously identical ochre roughcast houses, each with a little apron of brilliant green grass in front of it, like a synthetic rug. The shrubs, which had been planted like brushes at regular intervals furnished no leaves, flowers or shade at that time of year. All of the shutters were closed. The fifty-odd maisonettes were neatly lined up on either side of a broad central avenue, with gravel drives branching away on either side of it, leading to the habitations. From an airplane, it must have looked rather like a fish skeleton.

DWELLINGS DEDICATED TO COMFORT

Our bungalows provide perfect ease of access: terrace, patio, a functional kitchen, an ergonomic bathroom, two fine bedrooms...

Though holding onto the odd stick of family furniture, which stubbornly refused to fit into its new

home, Odette had seized the opportunity for refurnishing. Consciously or not, she had chosen items strangely similar to the contents of the show house they had visited a few months before. Martial just couldn't get used to it. It all felt so new, like plastic. Admittedly, everything was practical, and worked, but he felt as though he was living in a hotel. Meanwhile, Odette colonised the premises with a missionary-like determination. Every time they went into town, she came back with something, a useful or else decorative object, a bath mat, a vase, a toilet-paper holder, a monstrous yellow and black ceramic cicada... The only territory she had left for him was a corner of the basement where he could put his workbench and tools. Since moving in, he had spent most of his time there, lit by a desk lamp, sorting by size his screws, nuts and bolts before putting them into small boxes which he labelled and lined up on the shelves. It was a dull, but peaceful way to pass the time.

A CLUB-HOUSE

The residence's club-house, which is a veritable Leisure Pavilion, is *the* place to socialise. Everyone will love meeting up there for a chat, a game of chess, to surf on the web, have a game of billiards, take tea, make pancakes... Our secretary/entertainment manager will be both attentive and good-humoured in her organisation of competitions, excursions, outings, surprises and parties.

For the moment, it was closed and they had never met or even glimpsed the secretary/entertainment manager. If the truth were known, Martial didn't really care. He was even dreading the opening of the club-house. He had no desire whatsoever to participate in pancake-making competitions with strangers.

A SOLAR-HEATED SWIMMING POOL

To mingle health and pleasure, in delightful moments of freshness.

The pool was empty. Just a few centimetres of stagnant water covered the bottom.

SUNSHINE ALL YEAR LONG

All of our residences are located in the south of France, so as to ...

– Fat chance!

The catalogue flopped down onto the smoked-glass coffee-table, whose gilded metal legs looked like lions' paws. Martial folded his hands behind his head and shut his eyes. Suresnes, where they had lived for over twenty years, now seemed like a paradise lost. All that time they had spent building up little habits with single-minded determination to weave the fabric of a cosy existence, calling their tobacconist, baker and butcher by their first names, with the market on Saturday mornings, then their Sunday stroll on Mont Valérien... Then, come a certain age, someone retires to the centre of France, another one goes to Brittany, or to Cannes... or else the graveyard. The neighbourhood changed, almost overnight, without anyone even noticing. The population too. Their peaceful territory had metamorphosed into a sort of a hysterical playgroup where they no longer had their place. After Odette had pestered him for months about this idea of a secure residence, dripping with sunlight, he had at last given way in a moment of weakness. They had gone down to see the show house at the beginning of September. The weather had been wonderful.

– Just imagine it, Martial, it'll be as if we'd gone to live on holiday all year!

Monsieur Dacapo, the estate agent, was a charming chap with a divine gift of the gab. Martial and Odette exactly matched the profile of home-owners which the developers were looking for. They were both retired executives on comfortable monthly pensions. Selling their house in Suresnes would provide a perfectly satisfactory capital. They had no children at home or pets. Little by little, Monsieur Dacapo had succeeded in highlighting all of the residence's many advantages, in particular its security, its impenetrable perimeter fence, with surveillance cameras placed in strategic positions, and of course the janitor-manager who was described to them as being a sort of cross between a bodyguard and a guardian angel. Building work had not yet been completed, but in December their house would be ready to welcome them home. Of course, they did still have a little time in which to consider the offer, but not too long. Last year, during a reception weekend at a similar residence, the promoters had been expecting around a thousand visitors, but three times that number had turned up!

The deal was concluded within a month, during which Martial felt as though he had been hypnotised, signing documents which he had not even read, borne along by Odette's torrent of enthusiasm.

As they were the residence's first inhabitants, they had now been living in utter solitude for a month. They saw no one, apart from Monsieur Flesh, the janitor-manager who they ran into sometimes by the gate. He was a solid but rather taciturn fellow, and though he certainly looked the part, he inspired them with no desire to slap him on the back or have a friendly chat over a drink. From his

accent, he came from Alsace, or Lorraine. All that Martial had managed to grasp from this fierce guard-dog's semi-sealed lips was that another couple were due to arrive in March or April.

Martial stood up and rubbed the small of his back. This new armchair was dreadful. He should have insisted on keeping his old one which, over time, had ended up perfectly moulded to the shape of his body. The new one had such compact stuffing that, on getting up, it left the impression that no one had ever used it. Through the window, the TV aerials lined up in infinite regression made him think of crosses on tombstones. "And we've taken a life tenancy..."

Odette's voice rose up from the basement.

– Martial, what are you doing?

– Nothing, what do you expect me to be doing?

– Come down to the basement.

There was no need to yell like that, the place was far smaller than their house in Suresnes.

– Look, I've made room for the ironing board. You'll have to put some shelves up for me, there and there.

– OK. I'll buy some planks, and brackets... plus some rawl plugs, I've run out.

– We could go now, it's only just 3 o'clock.

– If you want.

– While we're there, I'll buy things to make jam.

– Jam?... But you've never made jam...

– That's right, and it's high time I started. I've found an old cookery book. Now we're living in the countryside, I'll make my own jams, it'll be more economical.

– The countryside? This is the countryside?... Where's the fruit? At this time of year, there are just apples.

– In that case I'll make apple jelly, it's really good.

– Why not, if you want to... All right, I'll take the measurements for the planks and off we'll go.

Martial had pressed the remote control to open the gate three times, but it still remained stubbornly shut.

– What's going on?

– Hoot the horn, Monsieur Flesh will open up.

At the second attempt they saw, in the fan formed by the wipers on the windscreen, the janitor with his jacket over his head, leaping between the puddles. Martial wound down his window.

- Good afternoon, Monsieur Flesh, I can't open the gate, maybe it's my remote control?
- No, it's because of the thunderstorm this morning. It seems to have put the electrics on the blink.
- Oh...
- I've called the service department. Someone should be along later to sort it out, but I don't know when exactly.
- And you can't open it manually?
- No, that's impossible. It's the security system. But if you need anything urgent, I can go for you. I'm parked on the other side.
- No, that's OK, thanks. But do tell us when it's been fixed.
- Of course. Have a nice day.

They spent it watching TV like two children who had been forbidden to go out, until dinner which they ate half an hour earlier than usual just to get it over with. Then, as they didn't like the programmes which were on that evening, they went to bed early. As he turned out the bedside lamp, Martial thought how, apart from the janitor's light, all must be dark for kilometres around them. They snuggled up close together.