

# Moon in a Dead Eye

Pascal Garnier

Translated from the French

by Emily Boyce

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## LES CONVIVIALES:

## THE RETIREMENT VILLAGE EXPERT'S

*Les Conviviales offers a fresh approach to retirement, allowing you to spend an active life in the sunshine. Here's a taste of what you'll find at Les Conviviales:*

## A SECURE GATED COMMUNITY

*There's nothing quite like knowing you're protected and secure. With a dedicated caretaker-manager on site 365 days of the year, our residents can enjoy total peace of mind.*

Martial compared the photo on the cover of the brochure with the view from the window. It was raining. It had rained almost every day for the past month. A slick of water shone on the Roman-tiled roofs of the identikit ochre pebbledash bungalows, each fronted by a matching patch of Astroturf-green lawn. At this time of year, the regimented rows of broom-like shrubs provided neither leaves, nor flowers, nor shade. All the shutters

were closed. The fifty or so little houses were lined up obediently on either side of a wide road, with gravel paths leading off to each home. Viewed from the air, it must have looked something like a fish skeleton.

#### HOMES BUILT FOR YOUR COMFORT

*Our single-storey houses are designed with accessibility in mind. Each comes with a sun deck, patio garden, fully equipped kitchen, ergonomically designed bathroom, two stunning bedrooms ...*

Aside from a few family heirlooms that had still not found their place, Odette had seized the opportunity to furnish the house with a whole new set of furniture which, by accident or design, bore a curious resemblance to the contents of the show home they had looked around a few months earlier. Martial could not get used to it. Everything had that box-fresh, plastic smell. Fair enough, it was practical, everything worked as it should, but it was like living in a hotel. Odette, meanwhile, was colonising the place with missionary zeal. She could not go into town without bringing some useful or decorative object back with her: a bath mat, a vase, a toilet-roll holder, a hideous black and yellow ceramic cicada ... The only territory she had conceded to him was a corner of the cellar for his workbench and tools. This was where he had spent most of his time since the move, working under the lamp sorting screws, nails and bolts by size and storing them in little boxes, which he labelled and stacked on shelves. It was a monotonous task, but he found it soothing.

#### THE CLUBHOUSE

*The clubhouse provides a place to get together and take part in all kinds of activities. It's where everyone meets to chat, play chess, surf*

*the internet, have a game of snooker, enjoy a cuppa, make pancakes ... Our friendly and helpful social secretary puts on competitions, walks, day trips, visits to local places of interest and evening entertainment.*

For the moment, it was closed, and they had not yet met nor even caught sight of the social secretary. Not that Martial was overly concerned. In fact, he was somewhat dreading the opening of the clubhouse. He had no desire to take part in pancake-tossing competitions with people he didn't know.

#### SOLAR-HEATED SWIMMING POOL

*Take a refreshing dip in the pool. What better way to relax while keeping fit?*

The pool was empty. A few centimetres of rainwater stagnated on the bottom.

#### YEAR-ROUND SUNSHINE

*All our villages are located in the south of France to make the most of ...*

'As if!'

The catalogue landed with a dull thud on the smoked-glass coffee table, whose gilded feet were shaped like lion paws. Martial locked his hands behind his head and closed his eyes. Suresnes, the Parisian suburb they had called home for more than twenty years, now seemed like a lost paradise. All those years spent doggedly accumulating a thousand little habits from which to spin a cosy cocoon of existence, on first-name terms with the newsagent, butcher and baker, going to the market on

a Saturday morning and taking the Sunday stroll up to Mont Valérien ... Then, one by one, their neighbours had retired to the Loire valley, Brittany, Cannes ... or the cemetery. The area had changed almost overnight, before they had a chance to notice. A different demographic. Where once peace and quiet had reigned, now screaming children ruled the roost. After months of putting up with Odette nagging him about moving to a gated, sun-soaked retirement village, he gave in. They went to look around the show home in early September. The weather was glorious.

'Just think, Martial, it'll be like being on holiday every day of the year!'

Monsieur Dacapo, the estate agent, had plenty of charm and the gift of the gab. Martial and Odette exactly fitted the owner profile the property company was seeking. Both were retired professionals with a suitable monthly income. The sale of their house in Suresnes would provide a more than adequate deposit. They had no dependants and no pets. Monsieur Dacapo had smoothly reeled off all the retirement community's advantages: security, above all, with intruder-proof fences and strategically located CCTV cameras, and of course the caretaker-manager, whom he made sound like a cross between a bodyguard and a guardian angel. Work on the site was not yet complete but their home would be ready to welcome them in December. Of course, they could go away and think about it, but they shouldn't take too long to do it. A thousand visitors had been expected at an open weekend for a similar village the previous year, but in the event three thousand had turned up!

The deal had been wrapped up in the space of a month during which Martial felt he was going about his life under hypnosis, signing papers he had not even read, carried along by Odette's gushing enthusiasm.

As the first residents to move into the village, they had spent the past month in total solitude. Aside from Monsieur Flesh, the caretaker-manager they sometimes bumped into at the gate, they saw no one. Flesh was a strapping fellow, but didn't have much to say for himself. He seemed to be very good at his job, but he wasn't the sort to slap on the back or have a glass of beer with. Judging by his accent, he was from Alsace, or Lorraine. The tight lips of this timid Cerberus had parted just long enough to let Martial know that another couple was due to arrive in March or April.

Martial stood up and rubbed the small of his back. This new armchair was a waste of space. He should have put his foot down and kept the old one, which had moulded perfectly to his body over the years. Its replacement was stuffed so tightly that when you stood up, it looked as though it had never been sat on. Through the window, the row of TV aerials stretched off into the distance like crosses in a cemetery. *We've bought ourselves a plot to lie in ...*

He heard Odette's voice calling up from the cellar.

'Martial, what are you doing?'

'Nothing. What do you think I'm doing?'

'Come down here.'

They didn't actually need to shout; the bungalow was a good deal smaller than their detached house in Suresnes.

'Look, I've made room for the ironing board. I just need you to put a few shelves up, here and here.'

'OK. We'll need to get some wood and brackets ... and wall plugs – I've run out.'

'We could go now, it's only three o'clock.'

'If you like.'

'I'll get the stuff to make jam at the same time.'



'Jam? You've never made jam.'

'Precisely, it's about time I started. I found an old cookbook. Now we're living in the country, I'm going to start making my own jams. It's far thriftier that way.'

'In the country, in the country ... With what fruit? There's nothing but apples at this time of year.'

'Well then, I'll make some nice apple jelly.'

'Up to you, if that's what you feel like ... Right then, I'll measure up for the wood and we can get going.'

Martial pressed the remote control three times, but the entrance gate refused to open.

'What's wrong with this thing?'

'Beep the horn. Monsieur Flesh will let us out.'

At the second attempt, they watched through the fan-shaped patch of glass cleared by the windscreen wipers as the caretaker sidestepped puddles to reach them, holding a jacket up over his head. Martial wound down the window.

'Afternoon, Monsieur Flesh. I can't seem to get the gate open; perhaps there's something wrong with my remote?'

'No, it was the storm this morning. Must have blown the electrics.'

'Ah ...'

'I called the management. Someone's coming to look at it this afternoon but I'm not sure what time.'

'And it can't be opened manually?'

'No. It's for security. If you need something urgently, I can get it for you; I'm parked the other side.'

'No, thank you, that's kind of you. If you could just let us know when it's fixed.'

'Of course. Have a good day.'



They spent the rest of the day like two grounded children, sitting in front of the TV until dinner time, which they brought forward half an hour to get it over with. Afterwards, there was nothing they wanted to watch, so they had an early night. As he turned off the bedside lamp, it occurred to Martial that, apart from the dull glow of the caretaker's lodge, there would be no lights on for miles around. They held each other very tightly.

Everything carried on in much the same way until 23 March. The weather had perked up a bit, now raining only every other day. They had on three occasions taken advantage of these temporary reprieves to head into town and to the coast, since the gate had, of course, been repaired. The beach was deserted. They walked along it effortlessly, light-headed from the wind which carried them further and further on. They felt fighting fit. The way back, on the other hand, proved much harder work with the wind against them. Bent double, brows beaten by spray, blinded by the sand flying up in their faces, the soggy trudge seemed to go on for ever. When they finally made it back to their car, their heads were pounding, their eyes bulging, their hearts thumping to a samba beat. It was several minutes before either of them could speak. The wind had played them a siren's song as they set out, a swan song on their return. The experience left them uneasy, with a lingering sense of having narrowly avoided catastrophe. They had not been to the beach since.

The shelves above the ironing board were now firmly in place and had even been adorned with a pretty trim of Provençal fabric – the perfect finishing touch.

New knick-knacks had appeared, like the wrought-iron floor