

# Boxes

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A Gallic Book

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FOR LAURENCE



Brice sat on a metal trunk he had struggled to close, with a silly little rhyme going round and round in his head: 'An old man lived in a cardboard box / With a squirrel, a mouse and a little red fox.' Cardboard boxes: he was completely surrounded by them, in piles stretching from floor to ceiling, so that in order to go from one room to another it was necessary to turn sideways on, like in an Egyptian wall painting. That said, there was no longer any reason to go into another room since, boxes aside, they were all as empty as the fridge and the household drawers. He was the sole survivor of the natural disaster that at one time or another strikes us all, known as moving house.

Following a terrible night's sleep in a room which had already ceased to be his, he had stripped the bed of its sheets, quilt and pillows, and stuffed it all into a big

checked plastic bag he had set aside the night before. He had a quick wash, taking care not to spray toothpaste on the mirror, and dutifully inspected the place in case he had forgotten something. But no, apart from a piece of string about a metre and a half long which he unthinkingly wound round his hand, there was nothing left but the holes made by nails and screws which had held up picture frames or shelves. For a brief moment he thought of hanging himself with the piece of string but gave up the idea. The situation was painful enough already.

There was still a good hour before Breton Removals would come to put an end to ten years of a life so perfect that it seemed it would last for ever.

That cold November morning he was furious with Emma for having left him helpless and alone, in the hands of the removal men, who in an hour's time would descend like a swarm of locusts to ransack the apartment. Both strategically and psychologically, his position was untenable, so he decided to go out for a coffee while he waited for the world to end.

The neighbourhood seemed already to have forgotten him. He saw no one he knew, with the result that, instead of going to his usual bistro, he chose one he had never set foot in before. Above the bar, a host of notices informed the clientele that the telephone was reserved for customers, the use of mobiles was strongly discouraged, it would be wise to beware of the dog and, of course, no credit would be given. A guy with

dyed red-blond hair came in, issuing a general 'Hi!' He was some sort of actor or comedian Brice had seen on TV. For a good few minutes he tried unsuccessfully to remember his name, then since this quest – as annoying as it was futile – led nowhere, he persuaded himself he had never known it. Behind him, wafts of disinfectant and urine came from the toilet doorway, mingling with the smell of coffee and dead ashtrays. A sort of black tide made his stomach heave at the first mouthful of espresso. He sent a few coins spinning on to the bar and made his escape, a bent figure with turned-up collar.

In the stairway he passed Monsieur Pérez, his upstairs neighbour.

'Today's the day, then?'

'Yes, I'm just waiting for the removal men.'

'It'll seem strange for you, living in the countryside.'

'A little, no doubt, to begin with.'

'And particularly in your situation. Speaking of which, still no news of your lady?'

'I'm hopeful.'

'That's good. I'm very partial to the countryside, but only for holidays, otherwise I don't half get bored. Well, each to his own. Right then, good luck, and keep your chin up for the move. It's just something you have to get through.'

'Have a good day, Monsieur Pérez.'

For the past month Brice had felt like someone with a serious illness. Everyone talked to him as if he were about to have an operation, with the feigned empathy

of hospital visitors. That moron Pérez was going off to work just as he had done every morning for years, and in the evening, after doing his shopping at the usual places, he would collapse, blissfully happy, on to his trusty old sofa in front of the TV, snuggling into his usual routine, sure of his immortality. At that moment, Brice would have loved to be that moron Pérez.

Breton Removals were barely five minutes late when they rolled up, but it seemed an eternity to him as he waited, leaning at the window and smoking one cigarette after another. It was a huge white lorry, a sort of refrigerated vehicle. Naturally, in spite of the official notices reserving the space between such and such times, a BMW had flouted the rules and parked right outside his apartment. The four Bretons (only one of whom actually was, Brice learned later) shifted the car in five minutes flat, as easily as if it had been a bicycle. Supremely indifferent to the chorus of car horns behind them, they took their time manoeuvring into position, displaying with their Herculean strength the utmost disdain for the rest of humanity.

This was a crack fighting unit, a perfectly oiled machine, a band of mercenaries to whom Brice had just entrusted his life. He was simultaneously reassured and terror-struck. He took the precaution of opening the door in case they took it off its hinges when they knocked.

As in all good criminal bands, the shortest one was



the leader. Mind you, what Raymond lacked in height he made up for in width. He looked like an overheated Godin stove. Perhaps it was an occupational hazard, but they were each reminiscent of a piece of furniture: the one called Jean-Jean, a Louis-Philippe chest of drawers; Ludo, a Normandy wardrobe; and the tall, shifty-looking one affectionately known as The Eel, a grandfather clock. This outfit of rascals with bulging muscles and smiles baring wolf-like teeth made short work of surveying the flat. Each of them exuded a smell of musk, of wild animal escaped from its cage. Strangely, Brice felt safe, as if he had bought himself a personal bodyguard. From that moment, however, came the nagging question: how much of a tip should he give?

In no time at all, the heavies toured the apartment, made an expert estimate of the volume of furniture and boxes, and concluded, 'No problem. Let's get on with it.' And they set to with a will. Chests of drawers, wardrobes, tables and chairs were transformed by grey sheets into unidentifiable objects, disappearing one by one as if by magic, whereas, a few years earlier, Brice had sweated blood getting them in. Ditto with the boxes, which for the past month he had struggled to stack, and which now seemed to have no weight at all on the removal men's shoulders. Despite the graceful little sideways jumps Brice executed to avoid them, each worker in his own way made it clear that he had no business getting under their feet: they knew what

they were doing. At that point, the existential lack of purpose which had dogged him from earliest childhood assumed monumental proportions, and he suggested going to fetch them cold drinks.

‘Beer?’

‘Oh no! Orangina, or mineral water, still.’

Even rogues went on diets, did they?

The Arab man who ran the corner shop where Brice bought his alcohol was most surprised to see him buying such tame drinks.

‘What’s this, boss? Are you ill?’

‘No, it’s for the removal men.’

‘That’s it then; you’re leaving us?’

‘That’s life.’

‘What about your wife? Still no news?’

‘I’m hopeful.’

‘We’ll miss you, boss.’

Clearly, given the amount of money Brice handed over to him in a month, the man had every reason to regret his departure.

On his return to the apartment, nothing remained but the bed and the flock of grey fluff balls grazing along the skirting boards.

‘That was quick!’

‘We’re pros. We don’t hang around.’

The Eel’s back was drenched in sweat. With the well-worn blade of his pocket knife, he cut the excess from a length of twine tied round what must have been a TV. Hemp fibres floated for a moment in the emptiness of

the apartment. Raymond appeared, grabbing a can of Orangina which he downed in one. He let out a long, loud burp and wiped his lips with the back of his hand.

‘Bloody intellectuals! You shouldn’t pile up boxes of books like that.’

‘I’m sorry, I didn’t know.’

‘Well, you do now.’

After this glittering riposte, Raymond the Stove handed him a green sheet, a pink sheet and a yellow sheet, jabbing his index finger at the exact spot where Brice had to sign.

‘Right, Lyon to Valence, best allow a good hour. Since we’ll be having a snack en route, let’s say two-thirty in your little village.’

‘I’ll be waiting for you.’

‘Fine. See you in a bit.’

Brice felt something tighten in his chest at the slightly too manly handshake and, as he closed the front door behind him for the last time, he had a vague idea of what a heart attack would be like. There, it was over. Brice was quite stunned. He recalled the anecdote about a man who was about to have his head chopped off by an executioner famed for his skill.

‘Please, Monsieur le bourreau, make a good job of it.’

‘But I’ve done it, Monsieur!’