

# The Islanders

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He opened one eye. In the seat opposite, a woman in her forties was smiling to herself as she looked through a set of photos she had probably just collected. They showed a baby with vermilion-red eyes being held under the arms like a hideous chrysalis. Next to her, a rough-looking skinhead was flicking through a copy of *Sécuri-mag*, 'the number one magazine for security professionals'. He gave the impression he took his job seriously.

Olivier glanced at his watch. In three-quarters of an hour he would be in Paris. Outside was empty space which the snow, despite falling heavily, could not fill. As the train entered a tunnel, he noticed a heart traced on the steamed-up window. He wondered which of them had drawn it: the lady with the photos or the skinhead. The skinhead, without a doubt. Olivier pulled his coat up round his ears. Even on the TGV it was cold, the icy air seeping in through the tiniest crack like a toxic gas. He lowered his eyelids and tried to return to his dream. All that was left of it was odd snippets, fragments that melted like snowflakes the moment he tried to grasp them. The roof of the clinic . . .

The roof of the rehab clinic in Tain was strewn with hip flasks filled with bad rum, whisky and brandy. Theoretically, people were supposed to leave cured. Theoretically. For most patients, it was simply a warm place to spend the winter. They hardly ever got to see a doctor, but there was a ping-pong table in the common room. They knocked the ball listlessly back and forth between doses of medication.

This was the first time in two years he had thought about his detox treatment. It had not been too painful. Just boring, like

military service. When he was let out two weeks later and met Odile, she asked him how he had got through it.

‘I told myself that if I was on a desert island, I’d have had no choice but to give up.’

‘And how do you feel now?’

‘Like I’m on a desert island.’

He had married Odile.

Distracted by memories, he could not go back to his dream. A girl tottered down the aisle. Nice bum, nice shaved head, as if she knew she was pretty enough to get away with making herself ugly.

Olivier weighed up whether to take a taxi or the metro from Gare de Lyon to Gare Saint-Lazare. A taxi would be more comfortable but he had not been on the metro for a long time. He had not done many things for a long time . . . After getting out of rehab he had decided to write a novel, the way retired people take up golf. On the first page of a new pad, he had noted down:

Father and Father Away

Keeping Mum

With Dog as my Witness

The Chronicle of Serious Burns

He never got beyond the titles. It had done him good, all the same. The most he had composed over the last two years was a few postcards, and that had been hard enough. He was scared of words. Even in speech, he used them as sparingly as possible. They belonged to another life, that of a small-time journalist reporting what passed for news – stolen ducks, sinks, mopeds – for the local rag. But since he and Odile had been running the perfume shop, he only needed to call upon about forty words of vocabulary: ‘Good morning, Madame’, ‘Goodbye, Madame’ and so on.

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A voice with a distinct garlic whiff of Provençal announced the train's arrival in the capital. One by one the passengers awoke from their trance, lowing like cows at milking time. Those who had been dying of boredom fifteen minutes earlier were now marvelling at the phenomenal speed of the TGV. The woman with the photos shot him a brilliant smile and the thick-set skinhead seemed to thicken further. Everyone was preparing to return to normal life and talking about the extreme temperatures that would greet them on the platform at Gare de Lyon.

'They're saying it's minus fifteen!'

'Minus seventeen, I heard!'

Olivier had always found his mother to be a pain in the neck. But dying a few days before Christmas, in Versailles, at minus seventeen degrees? That was something else.

The view from the window changed from fields to suburban houses, to four-storey buildings, to tower blocks. A few minutes later, Olivier was in Paris.

His hands thrust into the pockets of his parka right up to his elbow, Roland had been pacing up and down the concourse at Gare Saint-Lazare for half an hour. His left ear was still burning from the blow he had received. He was struggling to calm down. He could still see the stunned looks on the faces of the children who had witnessed the bust-up outside Galeries Lafayette: 'The Father Christmases too!' Roland and the other guy had been at one another's throats like two hookers fighting for turf. Their respective photographers had eventually managed to pull them apart. The other guy had blood all over his white beard, which was hanging round his neck like a napkin. Roland's beard was lost entirely. Monsieur Lopez, his photographer, had called him every name under the sun while he got changed in the toilets at Havre-Caumartin. That was where poor sods like him put on

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the traditional red outfit and cotton-wool beard on top of their own questionable clothing. Despite the torn hood, he managed to squeeze a hundred francs out of Lopez. He had really screwed up losing this job on day one. That hundred francs was all he had to his name.

He had instinctively fled to Gare Saint-Lazare because he had nowhere to go, and people with nowhere to go always end up at stations. If there was one thing he knew about, it was stations. He had spent three months playing deaf and dumb on commuter trains. One day he had come across a bag filled with a hundred or so Mickey Mouse key rings and the same number of pin badges, along with a card certifying that the bearer was deaf and dumb and authorised to sell on the SNCF rail network. He had kept his mouth shut for three months, until he had a run-in with a sour-tempered ticket inspector.

A succession of other roles followed, with Roland always playing against type . . . It was almost ten past midnight. It was so cold that the air seemed to have solidified. The travellers had doubled in volume, bundled up in layers of jumpers, scarves and coats. Puffs of steam emerged from their mouths, making them look like little factories. Roland had only been on earth for twenty-two years but it already felt too long. He would have liked to be adopted, if only for Christmas, by any one of those standing on the platform, stamping their feet to keep warm while checking the time on their watches.

Roland exchanged a few words and a cigarette with another homeless man as mangy as the dog by his side. The station was almost empty. Roland was as lonely as the ball inside a jingle bell. He jumped on the last train. It was going to Versailles.

Of all the foreign languages whirling in the air beneath the pyramid at the Louvre, Italian predominated. It was as if the Medicis had come back to house-sit for the holidays. Shivering,