

Pascal Garnier

Pascal Garnier was born in Paris in 1949. The prize-winning author of over sixty books, he remains a leading figure in contemporary French literature, in the tradition of Georges Simenon. He died in 2010.

Melanie Florence

Melanie Florence teaches at The University of Oxford and translates from the French.

Praise for Pascal Garnier:

‘Garnier’s take on the frailty of life has a bracing originality.’

Sunday Times

‘... Bleak, often funny and never predictable.’

Observer

‘Action-packed and full of gallows humour.’

Sunday Telegraph

‘Grimly humorous and tremendously dark ...

Superb.’ *Figaro Littéraire*

‘Pascal Garnier is not just an accomplished stylist but also an exceptional storyteller ... *The*

Panda Theory is both dazzlingly humane and heartbreakingly lucid.’ *Lire*

The A26



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by Melanie Florence

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For Isa and Chantal

The third streetlamp at the end of the road had suddenly gone out. Yolande closed her eye, which was pressed up to the shutter. The echo of the white light went on pulsing on her retina for a few seconds. When she opened her eye again there was only a black hole in the sky over the dead streetlamp.

‘I’ve stared at it for too long, and the bulb’s gone.’ Yolande shuddered and left the window. She had been watching the street not through a gap in the shutter but through a hole made specially. In the entire house this was the only opening on the outside world. Depending on her mood, she called it the ‘bellybutton’ or the ‘world’s arsehole’.

Yolande could have been anywhere from twenty to seventy. She had the blurry texture and outlines of an old photograph. As if she were covered in a fine dust. Inside this wreck of an old woman there was a young girl. You

would catch a glimpse of her sometimes in a way she had of sitting down, tugging her skirt over her knees, of running a hand through her hair, a surprisingly graceful movement in that wrinkled skin glove.

She had sat down at a table, an empty plate in front of her. Across the table another place was set. The ceiling lamp hung quite low, and was not strong enough to light up the rest of the dining room, which remained shrouded in darkness. You could sense, however, that it was cluttered with objects and pieces of furniture. All the air in the room seemed to be concentrated around the table, held within the cone of light shed by the lampshade. Yolande waited, bolt upright in her chair.

‘I saw the school bus this morning. The children were wearing every colour imaginable. Getting off the bus, they were like sweets spilling out of a bag. No, it wasn’t this morning, it was yesterday, or maybe the day before. They really did look like sweets. It brightened up just then, a streak of blue between the clouds. In my day children weren’t dressed like that. You didn’t get all those fluorescent colours then, not anywhere. What else did I see? Any cars? Not many. Oh yes, there was the butcher this morning. I’m sure it was this morning. He comes every Sunday morning. I saw him parking, the old bastard. He’s always trying to see in. He’s been at it for years. He never sees anything, and he knows he never will.’

Beef, some stringy, some covered in fat, with a marrow bone to boil up for a *pot-au-feu*. It was ready, had been cooking away all day. *Bub, bub, bubble*. The pan lid was lifting, dribbling out greyish froth, a powerful smell, strong like sweat. ‘What else did I see?’

Yolande showed no surprise at hearing the three quick taps at the door and the key turning in the lock. Her brother had always knocked three times to let her know it was him. There was no point, since no one ever came. But he did it anyway.

Yolande was still sitting with an empty plate. The room was cold, the cooker was off. Bernard hung up his wet coat. Underneath he was wearing an SNCF uniform; he worked for the railways. He was around fifty, and looked like the sort of person you would ask for some small change, the time or directions in the street. He greeted his sister with a kiss on the back of the neck as he went round to take his place opposite her. Locking his fingers, he cracked his knuckles before unfolding his napkin. He had a yellowish complexion and big dark shadows under his eyes. His flattened hair showed the circular imprint of his cap.

‘Haven’t you started? You should have, it’s late.’

‘No, I was waiting for you. I was wondering when the school bus last went by.’

‘Saturday morning, I expect.’

‘You’ve got mud all over you. Is it raining?’

‘Yes.’

‘Oh.’

They were both equally still, sitting upright in their chairs. They looked at each other without really seeing, asked questions without waiting for an answer.

‘I had a puncture coming home from the station, near the building site. It’s all churned up round there. You’d think the earth was spewing up mud. That’s their machinery, excavators, rollers, all that stuff. The work’s coming along quickly, but it’s creating havoc.’

‘Have you still got a temperature?’

‘Sometimes, but it passes. I’m taking the tablets the doctor gave me. I’m a bit tired, that’s all.’

‘Shall I serve up?’

‘If you like.’

Yolande took his plate and disappeared into the shadows. The ladle clanged against the side of the pot, and there was a sound of trickling juices. Yolande came back and handed the plate to Bernard. He took it, Yolande held on.

‘Have you been scared?’

Bernard looked away and gave the plate a gentle tug.

‘Yes, but it didn’t last. Give it here, I’m feeling better now.’

Yolande went back for her own food. From the shadows she said, without knowing whether it was a question or a statement, ‘You’ll get more and more scared.’

Bernard began to eat, mechanically.

‘That may be, I don’t know. Machon’s given me some new pills.’

Yolande ate in the same way, as if scooping water out of a boat.

‘I saw the butcher this morning. He tried to see in again.’

Bernard shrugged. ‘He can’t see anything.’

‘No, he can’t see anything.’

Then they stopped talking and finished their lukewarm *pot-au-feu*.