



THE PENNY  
THIEF

CHRISTOPHE  
PAUL

A POLICE THRILLER  
AND A LOVE STORY IN PARIS

*Christophe Paul*

**CHRISTOPHE PAUL**

# The Penny Thief

*Translated by Jennifer Adcock*

Original title: *Le voleur de centimes*  
Translation: Jennifer Adcock  
© Christophe Paul 2012

Cover design by Zinnia Clavo  
1<sup>st</sup> edition: August 2013

ISBN: 978-1492103592  
Legal depository: M-2832-2013

The characters and events portrayed in this book are fictitious.  
Any similarity to real persons, living or dead, is coincidental  
and not intended by the author.  
All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced, or stored in a retrieval system,  
or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying,  
recording, or otherwise, without express written permission of the publisher.

*Christophe Paul*

*To anyone who has ever suffered the arrogance, greed and injustice of  
the current financial system*

## CHARACTERS

Henri Pichon	Protagonist
Odette Lambert	Henri's Aunt
Maurice Lambert	Henri's Uncle
Jean-Philippe Maillard	Bank IT Director
Natasha (Tash) de La Valette	Daughter of Jean-Philippe
Pierre Gabriel de La Valette	Natasha's Husband
Marcel	Waiter at Relais de la Butte
Etienne	The boy with the bicycle
Yvette	Etienne's Mother
Monsieur Bernard	Baker at Fournil du Village
Madame Bernard	Wife of Monsieur Bernard
Valérie	The girl with the scooter
Naël	Valérie's boyfriend
Morgane Duchène	Risk Director, Lover of Maillard
Herbert Lenoir	Private detective
Silvano Garibaldi	IT expert
Olivier Loiseau	Police inspector

# 1

As the water rolled gently down the surface of his body and swirled down the shower drain in a frothy whirlpool, Henri Pichon gazed through the tiny bathroom window at the rooftops of Montmartre, which were soldiering their way through the last remnants of the night.

The bells of Saint-Jean-de-Montmartre cut his musings short.

Seven in the morning, time to get back to reality.

He closed the tap with a quick flick of the wrist, drew the transparent yellow daisy print shower curtain, being very careful not to sprinkle a single drop on the floor, and gingerly stepped out of the bathtub to place his 203 pounds on the bathmat. He vigorously shook the water off his abundant hair and searched his reflection in the mirror for some trace of what he used to be, not that many years ago. As usual, he thought about needing to do something to get rid of those extra pounds. He'd only recently hit the forties mark—still time to take charge of the situation.

He'd never quite understood why his aunt, his mother's sister, had preferred to install a bathtub that was barely over three foot long instead of a shower tray. In fact she never used it as a bathtub in her life. Apparently back then it used to be some sort of status

symbol.

Now that she was gone he had to do something...

He'd been thinking about it for a few years without getting round to doing anything—he'd also need to redo the kitchen, repaint the master bedroom, tear down the wall of his old room to expand the narrow living room. And why not, get rid of the little humdrum hall, pull up the creaky old parquet flooring and replace it with bright, modern floor boards, as well as the warped windows that distorted the outdoor world and which were impossible to close completely, turning the house into a veritable hurricane at the slightest sign of wind, not to mention the furniture, gloomy from layers upon layers of wax polish...

He'd even drawn up some plans...

The house was over a century old and it was undeniable that everything in it had been there from the very beginning. The only features he'd keep would be the beautiful moldings, ten foot above ground, and the two small but opulent fireplaces, which harkened back to the warmth of another era. The building stood on a corner of the Emile Goudeau square, formerly Place Ravignan, opposite the famous Le Bateau Lavoir,<sup>1</sup> a meeting place for painters and writers in the early 20th century.

Montmartre had gone from being a very poor neighborhood, to boasting the title of one of the most expensive and sought-after

---

<sup>1</sup> **Le Bateau-Lavoir** is a building located in the Montmartre district in the 18th arrondissement of Paris. It is famous for having been the residence and meeting place for many artists and writers in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Called The Trapper's House in the beginnings, it was later renamed by Pablo Picasso and his colleagues in 1904 as Le Bateau-Lavoir (washing-boat) because its wooden structure reminded of the washing boats anchored at the banks of the Seine.

People who used to frequent the place include Henri Matisse, Georges Braque, Fernand Léger, André Derain, Raoul Dufy, Maurice Utrillo, Jean Metzinger, Louis Marcoussis, Guillaume Apollinaire, Alfred Jarry, Jean Cocteau, Raymond Radiguet, Gertrude Stein, Charles Dullin, Harry Baur, Ambroise Vollard, etc.

districts in Paris today.

He was ready. This time the mirror returned the reflection of an elegant man of respectable stature, dressed casually in light trousers, a beige cotton sweater, and polo shirt of the same color. When he stretched you could hardly tell he was overweight, he could even pass for slim. And of course, he looked under forty, especially with all that dark, unruly hair, without a single strand of white.

With this sprightly positive feeling that was so characteristic of him, Henri grabbed his canvas jacket from the back of the sofa and went out.

He carefully closed the rickety, antediluvian bolt on the door and took to the old wooden stairs with their red threadbare carpet, making his way down the four flights of stairs that separated him from the street.

He was greeted by the fresh air outside. It was ten past seven in the morning of the last Sunday in Spring. The dense, leafy trees covered the cobblestone square in darkness, with the sun barely breaking in the East. The sky was clear, it was surely going to be a beautiful day. Henri smiled thinking it was going to be one of those pleasant Parisian days with that particular bright light which brings out the grandiose architecture of the city and the smiles on people's faces. It was too early for the tourists to be out on adventure.

He took a deep breath, crossed the square with its empty green benches, and strode down the ten stone steps that lead to the esplanade bordering Rue des Trois Frères, at the very moment when Marcel, the waiter at Le Relais de la Butte, was leaving the bak-



ery on the corner, loaded with croissants and other sinful pastries to serve for breakfast in the restaurant. The terrace was all set up for the day and he was the only customer.

“*Bonjour Marcel,*” said Henri.

“*Bonjour Monsieur Henri; comme d’habitude?*”

“*Comme d’habitude, merci!*”<sup>1</sup>

Marcel was by far old enough to retire but couldn’t bear the thought of being stuck between four walls twenty-four hours a day with his wife Armande and her non-stop nattering. He knew Henri since he was a little boy. He remembered when he first arrived in the neighborhood, moving in with his aunt and uncle Odette and Maurice Lambert after the horrible events that would be the talk of the papers all over the country, more than thirty years ago. The Lamberts had no children so they dedicated all their affection and care to the child.

Henri sat in his usual spot, in the outer corner of the terrace. It was one of those little brass-rimmed bistro tables with classical matching chairs. He sat, contemplating Paris as the sun came up, revealing the city little by little.

In this place, Rue Ravignan opened up before him, continuing on from the esplanade and widening towards the Seine to reveal the golden dome of *Les Invalides*,<sup>2</sup> where lay the tomb of Na-

---

<sup>1</sup> “Good morning, Marcel.”

“Good morning, Mr. Henri. The usual?”

“The usual, thanks!”

<sup>2</sup> The **National Residence of the Invalids** is a complex of buildings from the 17<sup>th</sup> century (1671-1676), located in the 7<sup>th</sup> arrondissement of Paris. Originally serving as royal residence for French soldiers and injured or elderly war veterans, today it houses several museums and religious exhibitions. In 1840, the remains of Napoleon Bonaparte were transferred there. Since 1940, the imperial mausoleum has also contained

poleon Bonaparte.

Henri worked every day of the year. Sometimes by night, others by day. He was a programmer at one of the main French banks. He didn't have a degree. In those days the degree in IT didn't exist. Candidates had to start in the IT department of a company and learn everything from scratch. Once there, the computer providers taught technical training courses in agreement with the companies, so that their staff could have a certain degree of autonomy. From systems engineers to lead programmers.

After completing high school with brilliant results, Henri had been hired to join the forces of banking IT, hand in hand with his uncle, Maurice Lambert.

Maurice Lambert was an IT veteran. He had studied electronic engineering in the United States and worked at IBM, to later return to France hired by a young, recently appointed director of the IT service of a large French bank: Jean-Philippe Maillard. A director who didn't kept his promises towards Lambert, or make his life easier when cancer crossed his path and took him away suddenly. A director who was a few years away from retiring, and who thought it normal that people like Henri Pichon should work every day of the year.

Henri did not complain about this fact, since he was allowed to work at his own pace and in his own time, when nobody was going to come and check what he was doing.

Before departing from this world, Maurice Lambert had enough time to teach him some of his wisdom and a few more things from his bag of tricks.

---

the remains of his son, Napoleon II. In addition it houses the remains of Napoleon's brother, Joseph I of Spain, as well as several of the marshals.

The smell of coffee and pastries heralded Marcel, who was carrying a steaming cup of café au lait served with croissants fresh from the bakery. He delicately placed everything on the little table.

“*C’est bientôt l’heure!*”<sup>1</sup> said Marcel before leaving discreetly with the empty tray under his arm.

Henri nodded, his dreamy gaze fixed on the dome of *Les Invalides*. It was quarter past seven and the first rays of sun were touching the rooftops in the east, illuminating the golden dome little by little.

He was perturbed only by the irksome sound of a distant motorcycle.

---

<sup>1</sup> “It’s almost time!”

2

“Etienne honey, it’s seven, the bells of Saint Jean just chimed, are you ready?”

“Yes mom.”

“Have you washed your face and combed your hair?”

“Yes mom.”

“Come here, let me see you and give me a kiss.”

The boy entered the kitchen like a whirlwind, gave a loud kiss to his mother, who contemplated him with love and admiration.

“You’re so tall. You grew some more last night! At this rate we’ll have to change all the doors in the house.”

“Mooom...” moaned Etienne.

“Go on, grab your bike and run and get the croissants while I wake up your little sister. When you get back we’ll have breakfast and then we’ll go and see grandma.”

And noticing the speed at which the boy rushed off she added, “Go slow and don’t go down the stairs, remember your last fall...”

But the door had already slammed shut. She shrugged, shook her head in helplessly, and went to the children’s bedroom. Etienne was an adorable 10-year-old rascal who knew how to make himself loved.

Etienne ran out of the concierge apartment where he lived

with his mother and sister, opened the door to the maintenance room in the patio and pulled out his shiny blue bicycle. It had been given to him by his parents for his birthday a few months ago. The old one hadn't resisted the last fall down the stairs of Montmartre. It was the bike's fault for not growing with him and causing his knees to knock the handlebar. It should be no surprise that he lost control and the two of them had ended up tangled on the floor. Fortunately, an old man who was out walking his dog came to the catastrophe and was able to call the fire-fighters to get them untangled. The issue resulted in a sprain and a few scrapes and bruises.

Now, with the new bike, there was not a staircase in Montmartre that would put up a fight, especially at this time in the morning when the tourists weren't out yet.

He went with care through the little gate of the property that lead to Rue Girardon—there were no cars, nor a living soul. He took to the left pedaling hard to tackle the little hill. A few yards on, he arrived to Marcel Aymé square, turned left again along Rue Norvins and, leaving the *Passe Muraille*<sup>1</sup> behind, he stood up on the pedals to take on the hill which was getting steeper and steeper. Finally he reached the top of the hill, looking onto the bakery

---

<sup>1</sup> **Le Passe Muraille**, *The Man Who Walked through Walls*, is a work by Jean Marais, a French actor and sculptor, created in 1989. It represents the figure of a man emerging from a wall. It is a homage to writer Marcel Aymé and his renown novel, "*Passe-Muraille*." Marcel Aymé lived and wrote most of his work in Montmartre.

In the novel, Dutilleul, a Registry office worker who lives in Montmartre, discovers that he has the ability to walk through walls. First he takes the chance to avenge the humiliation from his office colleagues, later to steal and get rich, until he is imprisoned. As a good Walker Through Walls he escapes and falls in love with a beautiful married woman who he sees behind the husband's back thanks to his ability. But finally one day the ability disappears and he is trapped forever inside a wall, on Rue Norvins... It is said that if you touch the left hand of the sculpture, you will acquire Dutilleul's ability.

of Monsieur Bernard, Le Fournil du Village—best croissants in Montmartre, according to his mother.

But Etienne preferred the croissants of Rue des Trois Frères. Not because they were better, but because they represented two sections of stairs leading down, one of them very steep and narrow, the kind that doesn't allow a margin of error. But first he had to go in the bakery of Monsieur Bernard; if his mother found out what he had done he would be grounded for at least a week.

So after diligently leaning his wonderful bike on the front window of Fournil du Village to keep an eye on it at all times, he went in, praying that the batch of croissants would not be ready, or that it had run out.

“Bonjour!” said Madame Bernard with a huge smile when she saw him, as she kept tidying the counter.

“Bonjour Madame Bernard,” replied Etienne eyeing the glass cabinet for the croissants, hoping not to see them.

Madame Bernard's surname was not Bernard, in fact it wasn't Monsieur Bernard's either. Monsieur Bernard was called like that because of his first name, and Madame Bernard followed suit because she was his wife, or out of empathy, something that Etienne still didn't understand very well and that caused more than one long and confused discussion at home, always at the most inadequate moments.

Le Fournil du Village was a remnant of the past, a nice and peaceful place, it had a few tables where the customers could sit down to have a coffee or a sandwich or a salad... But at this time on Sunday it was empty.

“Were you looking for croissants?” asked Madame Bernard with an expression that bode well.

“Yes, six please.”

“It’ll be a quarter of an hour still before the next batch is ready...”

Seeing the boy’s expression of joy, which she didn’t know exactly how to interpret, she felt obliged to say, “You could go down to the bakery on des Trois Frères, maybe you’re lucky, with the bike you’ll be there in no time at all.”

“Thank you very much, Madame Bernard, that’s what I’ll do. Au revoir!” answered the boy as he shot out, smiling from ear to ear.

Madame Bernard was left mid-sentence and shrugged her shoulders; too late to say goodbye, the little bell above the door had already jingled. Kids were like that. This one at least had good manners.

Etienne jumped onto his bike and pedaled down the street, straight to Place Jean Batiste Clément. When he got there, instead of cycling down Rue Lepic, he took a shortcut and dived down the steep stairs of Rue de la Miré, without breaking, trusting good providence that no pedestrian, dog or cat would be in his way.

“Yes!” exclaimed the boy when he reached the bottom in one piece.

And he continued his dizzying descent to the bakery of Rue des Trois Frères, on the corner with the wide side of the Rue Ravignan, which opened up to a fantastic view of Paris.

Instants later he caught sight of Place Emile Goudeau.

The pharmacy on the corner must have been on duty because the pharmacist was outside smoking, in his white robe, and yelled out to him, “Where are you going so fast? You’ll break your bones...”

But Etienne had more urgent things to tend to, such as dodging

the stone bollards that guarded the square, trees, Wallace<sup>1</sup> fountain, and green benches, in order to reach his destination without losing speed: one leap down ten stone steps that lead to the esplanade bordering with Rue des Trois Frères, and then brake to skid in front of the bakery.

The bike reached the top of the stairs shooting out like a missile. Everything was in its place: the esplanade, completely clear, the open bakery, the terrace tables of Relais de la Butte on the left perfectly positioned, the view of Paris opening up from Rue Ravignan... But there was something new for Etienne, a fantastic and unreal spectacle that caught the 10-year-old's eye: the sun seemed to ignite the golden dome of Les Invalides.

The sound of a motorbike brought him back to reality.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Wallace fountains** are a type of public fountain providing drinking water and considered as one of the symbols of Paris. Their creator and promoter was British philanthropist Richard Wallace towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.



### 3

Valérie was finishing breakfast, dreamily and half asleep. Today was a big day—she had at last agreed to her boyfriend Naël introducing her to his family. They'd been living together for two years and despite some ups and downs things seemed to be moving forward.

She came from a liberal Catholic family. Catholics by family tradition, though nobody went to church or was shocked when a non-conformist criticized the Church. Each to their own with their life and beliefs!

But on Naël's side the situation was different. His family was devoutly Jewish. He had tested the ground rather indelicately, explaining that the Jewish religion is passed down on the mother's side, that he was very close to his family, and that he didn't want to make them suffer. But Valérie didn't want to jump through hoops, whether they were Catholic or Jewish, and rebelled as the good warrior that she was. She would only accept a civil marriage.

She had agreed to meet Naël's family, caving in after much insistence, and because her parents had told her this wouldn't commit her to anything but at least that way she would bring some peace to the atmosphere in the in-laws' family.

She didn't know what was going to happen, Naël had spoken to her a lot about them: what they were like, what was convenient

to say or not say, what subjects were taboo. In fact, he had gone directly to his parents house on Friday after work to prepare the ground, and she was taking the 8:45 TGV<sup>1</sup> to Lyon. They would return together that night after spending the day with them.

The bells of Saint Jean de Montmartre brought her back to reality.

“Damn, it’s seven, if I miss the train all hell will break loose, thank goodness my suitcase is packed and I’ve already bought the ticket,” thought Valérie, finishing off her cup of tea. She ran to the bathroom.

Five minutes later she was at the door of the elevator, suitcase in hand. She would put on a bit of makeup on the train. But very little, because Naël’s parents didn’t like girls wearing too much makeup. Good job that Lyon was far away.

Five minutes later she was unlocking her scooter, she planned to leave it in the motorbike parking space opposite the station.

Moments later a very loud red rocket, driven by a Valérie running late to catch her train, thundered across the Rue des Trois Frères.

She eased off the gas as she crossed Rue Ravignan just in case a vehicle was approaching, unlikely on a Sunday at this time in the morning.

For a fraction of a second, her eyes caught the gleam of the sun-rays on the gold-covered dome of Les Invalides. “Paris is so great!” she thought, looking back to the road.

---

<sup>1</sup> TGV High velocity train, 2 hours Paris to Lyon.

4

Henri Pichon bit off half a croissant. How delicious, he had to seriously think about going on a diet. He couldn't go on like that. Since his aunt passed away and he inherited the house and some money saved from what he contributed from his pay to boost his meager state pension, Henri had gone back home and all he did all day was eat, read, and walk around Montmartre. It was like living in a village without the inconveniences.

He had become independent from his aunt and uncle a few months after starting work. When they buried Maurice, he was devoted to taking care of his aunt Odette. He had moved house several times but always within Paris. He had never bought a house because on his salary he couldn't afford it. Girlfriends, he'd had plenty, and had even lived with one of them for seven years, she was a lot younger than him and didn't want to have children at the time. When at last she got pregnant, it was thanks to the next door neighbor with whom she'd had a "stable relationship" for a few years. This coincided with the death of his aunt Odette, and he decided to move to Montmartre, alone.

He watched absent-mindedly as the explosion of golden fire set alight the dome of Les Invalides. It started on the little cross that crowned it, descended down the pole and at last ignited the

whole dome.

The phenomenon lasted around ten minutes, ten minutes during which Henri was absolutely spellbound.

He lifted his cup to take a sip of the tasty coffee and thus increase his feeling of fulfillment.

## 5

Etienne looked away from the dome of Les Invalides to tug his bicycle handlebars and land on the back wheel, to cushion the fall and better control the final skid.

A sneaky pigeon hidden in the second step took off startled by what was coming above, and flew into his arms flapping in his face.

When the pigeon managed to free itself of such an aggression, the bicycle and its young proprietor were free-falling down an unforeseen trajectory.

Henri Pichon, before managing to sip his coffee and reach fulfillment, didn't see it coming when he received on his back the entire weight of the unidentified flying object, projecting him four yards ahead, in the middle of Rue des Trois Frères, along with the chair, table and breakfast. Still semi-conscious he attempted, as a good programmer, to analyze the situation, which seemed very confusing.

A fraction of a second later a red and noisy rocket charging ahead at full throttle crashed into the jumble of chair, table, breakfast and Pichon.

Henri gave up trying to find an explanation to what was happening and drifted out of consciousness, as Valérie landed squat in the middle of the street with no idea what was going on, and

Etienne wondered how he was going to explain all this to his mother in order to minimize the punishment.

### *La Defense<sup>1</sup> - Monday*

Jean-Philippe Maillard came out of the meeting room next door and entered his immense office. He stood opposite the large glass window that occupied the entire back wall, watching people come and go on La Défense esplanade, fifteen floors below, whilst he dialed a number on his cell phone.

They looked like ants, and had always given him a sense of deep superiority. From up here he felt godlike.

“Tash sweetie, it’s your dad.”

“Hi dad, what’s up, where are you?”

“At the office. Listen, is your husband still interested in working at the bank?”

“Of course he is, you know he’s not happy where he is now.”

“Nobody forced him to resign from the position I got him ten years ago.”

“Try to understand, it’s normal, what would you have done if

---

<sup>1</sup> **La Défense** is a modern business district located in the west of Paris, as a prolongation of the “axe historique” (historical axis) that begins at the Louvre and continues along the Champs Elysees, and the Arc of Triumph, through to the Neuilly bridge and *La Grande Arche de la Défense*. This district is essentially composed of office skyscrapers, connected by a huge 31-hectare pedestrian esplanade (*Le Parvis*). The hanging gardens and seventy works of art have made it a veritable open air museum and a much-loved promenade for the people who live or work there. Together with the City of London, it is the most important business district in Europe.

after ten years of effort waiting for the management position to become free, they gave it to an incompetent dimwit who you have always covered up so they won't fire him."

"Those kinds of things don't happen to me, I started out in management thanks to my studies, my effort, and my..."

"Dad, please, let's not start again. What did you want to tell me?"

"I have a position for him. Nothing important at the moment, but it allows me to get him on the payroll."

"Wasn't everything blocked?"

"Quirks of fate, one of my systems engineers had an accident and hasn't come to work yesterday or today..."

"Yesterday, Sunday?"

"Yes, and we're going to miss him, he's been here for over 20 years, he is the most competent person I have onboard. So tell Pierre-Gabriel to be prepared to work the odd weekend. I'll have to hire a few people anyway to cover the vacancy and the work he used to do."

"And when your injured staff comes back, what will happen to Pierre-Gabriel?"

"I don't know if he will be back, he's in a coma, a severe concussion, several broken ribs..."

"Don't tell me the details, it makes me feel ill."

"Well, even if he did come back, I wouldn't leave him alone. I can't risk just one person having so many responsibilities. Right now we have a big problem with the management of closing transactions."

"That's exactly Pierre-Gabriel's specialty."

"Get in touch with him and send him to me."

"Thanks dad. I'll call him right away."



Jean Philippe Maillard hung up and gazed through the window for a few moments. From his office he could see almost the entire set of skyscrapers of La Défense organized throughout the esplanade. On the left he found the old Fiat tower with its forty-four floors, in which he started his career and his brilliant trajectory. They still had a computer room on the fifth floor of the basement, which handled all the bank transactions. Henri Pichon worked there and that's where Pierre Gabriel de La Valette, his son-in-law, would go.

He didn't like him—he belonged to that pretentious class of old French nobility in decadence that allowed themselves to look down on common mortals from their sky-high position, forgiving them for existing because of the simple fact that he would inherit a Renaissance castle in Poitou.<sup>1</sup> Even when he talked with him, he felt that condescending arrogance, although it was very subdued because of the respect that Maillard imposed around him.

In any case he had to think about the future and the future of future generations. He was planning to retire in a few years and it wouldn't be a bad investment to leave his son-in-law in a good situation for the benefit of his daughter and his progeny, which, by the way was taking its time to arrive. But they were young. Tash, Natasha, was thirty-two years old and Pierre-Gabriel was thirty-seven. They both worked in IT, she in management and he in systems, but Tash had looked for work on her own, away from the influence of her dad, the opposite of Pierre Gabriel, who allowed his father-in-law to pull strings at one of the subsidiaries of his bank group.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Poitou** is an old province of France, whose capital was Poitiers. It belongs to the current regions of la Vendée, Deux-Sèvres, and Vienne, in west France.

Pichon on the other hand belonged to that extinct race of submissive workers, just like his uncle... what was his name...? Oh, right, Lambert, Maurice Lambert. It had been a while since he thought about Maurice. The kind of person that didn't complain, Henri Pichon had never asked for a raise, he was content with what the annual salary index imposed. For the work he did he earned next to nothing. He could have multiplied his salary by ten. Some engineers of this level even earned more than himself.

Now it was necessary to replace him with two or three senior programmers, which was going to cost him a fortune, not to mention the technical and organizational problems that could arise.

7

Worried, anxious faces furnished the little waiting room of the acute care unit of the Hospital de la Pitié Salpêtrière of Paris. Among them was Valérie, who had taken the day off to look after the man who came into her life way the previous day, involuntarily barging into her destiny.

She remembered yesterday's events with horror and was still in shock. How a mass of objects, among which she thought she recognized a chair, had crossed her way when she was going to Gare de Lyon to catch the train that would seal her future with Naël. She was going too fast for the narrow streets of Montmartre. But even if she was going at a more prudent speed it would have been impossible to avoid him. The crash had been inevitable.

When she managed to get back to reality and process her sensations, she was sitting on the cold paving stones and her rocket formed a part of that jumble, which was still dragging along, the back tire turning slowly.

A ten-year-old boy with a bicycle thrown at his feet watched the scene with wide open eyes, pacing continuously from the jumble to her and from her to the jumble, where a man dressed as a waiter attempted to put some order.

“Are you OK, madam?” asked the worried waiter.

“I think so,” she said, picking herself up from the floor with some effort, not because anything hurt, but because she was afraid it might hurt. “I’m sorry, I don’t know what happened...”

She paused mid-sentence. After pushing the motorcycle away, the waiter removed a chair and a table, revealing the body of a man who seemed to be dead.

“Oh God!” exclaimed Valérie, on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

“Calm down, he’s only unconscious. If you have a cell phone, please call the emergency number...”

“I already have,” thundered the baker, a stocky man, with a fat child-like face and a Charlie Chaplin-style moustache, as he stooped down to see if he could help.

“What happened, Marcel?” he asked the waiter.

“A cruel trick of destiny. The boy,” started explaining Marcel, indicating with a movement of his chin towards Etienne, “the boy was going down the stairs with the bike, when a pigeon made him lose control...”

“Damn rats with wings!” muttered the baker.

“Destiny,” continued the waiter. “He lost control and landed on top of poor Monsieur Henri, who was peacefully watching the first rays of the sun on the dome of Les Invalides.”

“Nice last image before death,” philosophized the baker.

“He’s not dead, only unconscious,” repeated Marcel patiently.

“And the girl?” inquired the baker, pointing at Valérie with his moustache.

“Unfortunately for her, she was coming down Rue des Trois Frères at the wrong time, and couldn’t do anything.”

The baker looked at the boy and then at the girl with the rocket, pale as ghosts, and sentenced, “You were both going too

fast...”

Valérie burst into tears and Etienne, who didn't know what else to do, did the same.

Marcel threw a glance of contempt at the baker and without moving from where he was, said, “Calm down, it was all bad luck, I saw everything, don't worry. You'll see how he'll get well straight away.”

But Henri was still unconscious and the right side of his head was bleeding a lot, despite the fact that Marcel was pressing it with his napkin.

“The ambulance will be here straight away and they'll take him to the Emergency Room,” he went on, to convince himself. Madam, take care of the boy and see if you can call his mother.

Minutes went by, nobody spoke, except the baker who explained what happened to the few passers-by.

A couple of perfectly organized gendarmes<sup>1</sup> were the first to arrive. One of them knelt down close to Marcel to see the wounded man, and the other asked what had happened.

The baker narrated his own embellished version of the story. Marcel whispered to the gendarme who had knelt beside him, “He didn't see anything, he was in his bakery taking out a batch of bread.

The gendarme stood up and interrupted the baker's rant, advising, “Are you sure you witnessed everything you are going to tell us? Because I remind you that this declaration will go to court and you will have to respond for what you've said.

---

<sup>1</sup> **Gendarme:** A member of the French *gendarmerie*, a military force with police duties dealing with the civil population.

The gendarme fixed his eyes on the baker, sternly, until the latter lowered his gaze, admitting, “Marcel, the waiter, told me all this, he saw everything.”

“Very well, Monsieur, thank you for your help, but now we would appreciate it if you go back to your business,” he then looked around and added with a commanding voice that did not admit discussion: “people who have nothing to do with this, carry on, come on, carry on!”

The ambulance arrived at the same time as Etienne’s mother, who started crying even more when his mother looked at him disapprovingly, saying, “What have you done now?”

Valérie calmed her down, relating how it had happened in the same way as Marcel, the waiter, had explained. When Etienne’s mother wrapped him in a strong embrace, saying everything was all right, it wasn’t his fault and Monsieur Henri was going to be fine straight away, she felt she needed someone to do the same to her.

The paramedics seemed very competent. They took Henri away in a stretcher after fitting a collar and perfusion.

Marcel stayed standing for a while in the middle of the street looking in the direction that the ambulance had headed off in. Ungainly, his arms hanging, apron and napkin drenched in blood, he felt his soul was empty.

One of the gendarmes approached him tactfully and politely.

“Come with me, let’s go and sit in the van and take your declaration.”

Marcel walked in front of Valérie at the same time as she hung up her phone telling herself, “Bastard! He only cares about his family, he should stay with them.” And she burst into tears.

Marcel put his hands on her shoulders, as a father would, and sensing what it was about, said, “Sometimes certain events can shed light on things we were used to because of routine—and it gets clearer.”

Valérie realized that destiny had just ended a phase of her life.

**8**

A young doctor wearing his white coat unbuttoned and a tired face barged into the little waiting room. Everyone present looked up in fear and hope.

“Relatives of Henri Pichon?”

Valérie raised her finger bravely, like in school, under the despairing gaze of the others.

“Follow me please.”

She went out through another door, following him nervously, eyes fixed on the old and clean floor tiles. After walking for a brief moment which seemed to last forever, they entered a small office with green walls and Formica furniture.

“Sit down please.”

He looked at her with a calming expression whilst Valérie took the moment to try and explain her situation, “I’m not really a relative of Monsieur Pichon, the thing is...”

“They’ve let me know. Monsieur Pichon has no close relatives. It seems that little by little life has divested him of all his loved ones. After evaluating the case, we have decided, as an exception, to overlook the visitors rule.”

Seeing Valérie’s surprise, he added, “Henri Pichon has a severe TBI.”

Valérie made a questioning face.



“Sorry, a TBI is a traumatic brain injury. Henri Pichon has been in a stable coma for twenty-eight hours. We are transferring him to the ICU. We’ve seen that in these cases there is a better chance of waking up when the patients are accompanied.”

“I can be available for some days, but I’ll have to go back to work.”

“I understand, you’ll also have to carry on with your life...”

“My life! My life has just changed drastically, thanks to Henri Pichon my life has taken a one hundred and eighty degree turn. And I’m saying that without a pinch irony.”

“Henri Pichon’s life has, too,” said the doctor, pensively, like an ascertainment.

“I’m very sorry, I’ve had a part in...”

“Tell me how it happened.”

Valérie started to narrate the events under the calm gaze of the young doctor. As she spoke and calmed down, she started to notice the young doctor; he was good looking. First the accident, then the arrival of Etienne’s mother, the boy, the part about the gendarmes, and she rounded off by psychoanalyzing her relationship with Naël.

...

“I hung up calling him a bastard and after all the paperwork of the accident, I called a friend and stayed at her house. I collected all my clothes and things and I came here to wait.”

She said everything very seriously, with the attitude of a woman who knows where she’s going and what she has to do.

“Have you been here since yesterday morning?” asked the doctor.

“No, no. Yvette, Marcel, and I have been taking turns.”

And seeing the doctor’s surprise she added, “Yvette is the

mother of Etienne, the boy that catapulted Monsieur Pichon, and Marcel is the waiter at Relais de la Butte, who witnessed everything. He knows Henri Pichon since he arrived in Montmartre to live with his aunt and uncle after he lost his parents, when he was still a child.”

“And do you think you could continue to take turns for some time?”

“How much longer do you think he will be in a coma?”

“It’s hard to tell exactly. The head presents a hematoma that extends from the frontal region to the occipital region. Because we noticed an increase in intracranial pressure, we carried out a CT. It’s a scanner...” seeing that Valérie was nodding and understanding, he continued, “he has an edema in the occipital region.”

“What does that mean?”

“The edema is being reabsorbed. It may be that within a few days it stops pressing on the brain and he wakes up. He may also wake up before the full reabsorption. Or...”

“Or?”

“Or he could get worse and have complications. But it’s not the normal thing in the picture he presents.”

“And what will happen when he wakes up?”

“Concussions are usually due to deep injuries in the skull or the fast acceleration or deceleration of the brain injuring the tissues at the point of impact and in the opposite pole due to the counter-coup, and sometimes slightly on the inside of the frontal and temporal lobes. The nervous tissue, blood vessels and meninges tear and break, causing nervous interruptions, ischaemia or intracerebral and extracerebral bleeding and edemas. But in our case, for some unknown reason, the scanner has not shown any damage, except for this edema pressing on the occipital area and which

is rapidly reabsorbing.

Valérie remained silent waiting for the answer to her question.

“When he wakes up he shouldn’t have any after effects. But I can’t guarantee it, his case is classified as severe and the brain is still a mystery to us. On the other hand, he has multiple traumas in the rest of the body, I think it was four broken ribs, displacement of the second cervical and fifth lumbar, but the spine was not affected. This afternoon the osteopath will come and decide whether we can proceed or whether we should wait for a surgery. It is preferable not to go into the operating room until TBI is resolved.”

“OK, I will call the rest to take turns.”

“Good, when you finish your calls I’ll take you by his side.”

“And what do I need to do?”

“There is no silver bullet, just hold his hand and talk to him about whatever you want. One more thing, at this stage he might move his fingers or any other part of his body, it’s normal.”

Did you enjoyed it, do you want to read more?

Do not hesitate find it at:

[viewBook.at/The-Penny-Thief](http://viewBook.at/The-Penny-Thief)

...

Thank you very much.