



SUCKER TRICK
IN JOLIETTE

JEAN-CLAUDE CASTEX

*To my dear Marie-France,
for the 60 years of marriage
we have shared.*

SUCKER TRICK IN JOLIETTE

Jean-Claude Castex

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Hell depicted in a medieval manuscript from Mont Sainte-Odile (Alsace)

●1●

The accident

The most trivial causes sometimes have profound and lasting effects on our existence. Réal Vadeboncœur of Joliette was to experience it dramatically on that hot July afternoon. At around 2:00 p.m., in his wife's Nissan Versa, he was driving down SaintLouis Street towards the Saint-Charles-Borromée intersection. He stopped at the Sainte-Anne bullet to let a young girl with big blue eyes and a vertiginous cleavage pass. This gallantry caused Réal to lose a few precious seconds, so that, on arriving at the corner of the Rue Saint-Charles-Borromée-Nord, a group of schoolboys obliged him to stop longer.

Opposite, on the sidewalk of the Parc Louis-Querbes, a young darkhaired woman, her head wrapped in a green silk scarf, stood patiently under a tree, waiting patiently to cross the street. Suddenly, to Réal's amazement, an old black Buick burst up with a bang, took a bite out of the sidewalk and hit the passerby head-on. She was thrown more than five metres against an electricity pole "like a garbage bag thrown by a municipal garbage collector", commented a witness. If, a few moments earlier, Réal had not let the beautiful big blue eyes pass him by, he would not have been a witness of this accident, and consequently would not have been drawn into this absolutely delirious criminal investigation which was to prove to him that the best men were not the ones who had been killed in the past.

—Their paradises are not always lost paradises.

Réal Vadeboncœur was a private investigator. Throughout his youth, he had dreamed of a career in criminal policing. His attempts to join the Gendarmerie had failed miserably. His

application was not even accepted. In fact, his case had not gone beyond the preliminary inquiry stage. He would have been so proud to wear the blue-white-red¹ uniform of the RCMP Academy in Regina. Admittedly, the motto of the school embarrassed him a little, as he was sometimes bothered by some problems of penile rigidity; but he would have passed it over with good fortune.

An investigator came to Joliette, the neighborhood of his childhood, to ask his former classmates, his neighbour, the merchants, and even his parish priest, what kind of child and adolescent he had been. It was almost an ecclesiastical quest for canonization! Brief! He wasn't an angel at that time. Nor a scoundrel, for that matter. He had smashed a window or two, smeared graffiti on immaculate walls, and rang a few doorbells for fun before fleeing. Childishness! For these peccadilloes, the Mounted Police had, with a simple wave of the hand, discarded him from a successful career in its ranks. She could not imagine what a collaborator she had been deprived of.

Réal submitted his resume to the recruiting department of the Sûreté du Québec, historically the oldest and most venerable police force in Canada. If he was refused, he would only have to contact the municipal police of Port-Menier on Anticosti Island or Cap-Aux-Meules on Magdalen Islands. Exile in these distant archipelagos would certainly have a beneficial effect on his physical health; But isolation would probably alter his psychological state. There's no doubt about it! Fortunately, the S.Q. had granted him an interview. His wishes had been granted. Although less prestigious and respected, the sleuths of the Sûreté were certainly as clever as those of the Federal Gendarmerie.

Réal was therefore admitted to the École Nationale de Police in Nicolet. It had been the happiest day of his life... after the day of

¹ •Blue pants with white stripes and red jacket. The school motto is in French : *Maintiens le Droit*, which meant whether *Keep the Law* or *Keep it upright*.

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his Communion, he was in the habit of specifying so as not to displease his old mother, who was very attached to religious traditions. But this happiness was short-lived. At the end of the first knockout phase of the training camp, his hopes were once again shattered into a thousand pieces like a crystal glass. Réal, the hero of this hallucinatory story – some even say insane – failed miserably in the examinations intended to close the first phase, the success of which was required to participate in the twelfth.



●2●

Réal, Private Investigator

Too proud to try his luck with the Municipal Police of the Islands at the End of the World, Réal decided to become his own boss by founding his investigation office. He would be "a private", quite simply. In this way he would establish his own worth by his prowess, and demonstrate to all these police forces that they had clumsily neglected an irreplaceable asset by refusing his support and cooperation. There is no longer any question of him humiliating himself by going like an unemployed man in desperate need to knock a third time on the door of these police forces, whoever they may be, to implore them to grant him their mercy. He had even imagined, in one of his most extravagant dreams, that he had discovered that he had the gifts of a dowser, an extra lucid, an oracle or a prophet, and that these policemen would end by coming to consult him, to beg him to grant them his enlightenment in order to solve riddles that were too dark. Ah! What revenge that would be! He could make them wait in an antechamber in order to humiliate them for his personal pleasure.

His career had thus begun immediately. He had posted his picture in his office in the uniform of the National Police Institute, and when people exclaimed with admiration:

—*Ah! Did you go to the National Police Institute in Nicolet?*

He used to reply casually:

—*Yes! Of course! It's obvious. I'd never have embarked on such a career as a profession, without the meticulous training of the INP, the National Institute of Police.*

—*It's a guarantee of qualification!*

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—*You'd better believe it!*

As if it were self-evident. In the course of his already long career, he had followed a good part of the Joliet men and women with libertine morals on behalf of their wives or husbands, and he had solved investigations, well, very convoluted, I would even say mysterious. Ok then! Luck and chance had joined forces to give him a generous helping hand. But as always, in some cases, these small successes had strengthened his ego. With a touch of false modesty, he took at face value the compliments of his charm, without admitting that chance had often offered him the key to the riddles on a silver platter. But who doesn't do that?

To return to his inquiries into the good morals of his countrymen, he condemned, with all his force and without appeal, all those new permissive laws which complacently granted divorce on simple application, as one would do to obtain a license to destroy. This excessive tolerance had literally taken the bread out of his mouth. It was infuriating to see all this moral flippancy. Ah! How good it was in the recent days when everything that was not obligatory was forbidden, when the investigator had to photograph the scoundrels and scoundrels red-handed, in order to allow his client to divorce himself for his own benefit.

How many times had he shut himself up in stinking cupboards, lying in wait to confound scoundrels, in the midst of dirty linen so foul-smelling that he might have thought he was in a skunk's nest. He liked to wait for hours for the lovers he was lawful, trapping them and photographing them with a flash in absolutely irrefutable positions? He had kept a whole gallery of photographs that showed off many of the city's best citizens, naked, embracing, with their mouths open and the terrified eyes of deer caught in the dazzling headlights of the car that was about to destroy them. The judge never failed to smile as he reveled in his eyes at these incredible spectacles, after having turned the photo in all

directions in order to discover where the top and the bottom should be.

—Ah! Ah! Ah! You can deny the facts until the year 3000, my dear sir; This photo is worth 1000 confessions and 2000 papal sermons! The Right Honourable Maurice Duplessis could testify in person on your behalf— you wouldn't win!

—But it's just a scandalous, scabrous edit... invented from scratch... with actors!

—Editing, perhaps. In any case, the main actor in this "montage", as you say, resembles you like a twin brother... Do you have a twin brother?

—No!

—So I can't help but think it's you!

On a few occasions, he had been furiously boxed by cheating husbands. It had shaken his incisors and his spirits. One

One day, a truck driver from Ciment-Lafarge, whom he had nicely trapped, had filled his car with concrete through the inadvertently open window. The fast-setting cement, of well-known quality, had had time to dry before it returned. But he preferred to forget those unpleasant moments which punctuated his existence like the fourteen stages of an ordeal.

Since mores had changed and divorce was granted à la carte, like daily specials at a self-service restaurant, he had lost most of his lucrative livelihood. Fortunately, there were still the investigations into the dogs stolen or run over to allow him to survive. And his wife had to work hard to keep the pot boiling. Not that it's a problem; On the contrary, he worked almost night and day for an obole, a minimum income that did not even reach the poverty line. He was even forced to make ends meet by monitoring department stores and conducting anti-fraud surveys on behalf of the Health

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Insurance, and even the babysitters whose clientele was disputed with him by the local girls. What a downfall! And with all these horrible cases of pedophilia that hit the headlines and made parents more suspicious than ever, this last source of income was drying up as quickly as the Sahara wadis. He'd taken it down a notch when he'd taken on a job as Santa Claus during the holiday season to put a little butter in the spinach on New Year's Eve. Membership in the Association des Pères Noël du Québec had forced him to acquiesce in

He had never been able to lose a single one of the Christmas pounds.



●3●

The Investigation Begins

This fortuitous accident in the Rue Saint-Charles-Borromée would perhaps enable him to restore his wounds and strengthen his failing personality; A personality so modest, so humiliated, so mediocre, that he almost needed psychological tweezers to analyze his poor ego, like a numismatist manipulating rare stamps. However, when this old Buick had run over the passer-by, he had the very professional reflex to write down the registration number on the blue and white plate of the Belle Province: JSG 542, before it disappeared forever without a trace. A beautiful hit-and-run. If he could, he would have chased after him like James Bond, but the laws being what they are, he risked big trouble in the event of an accident. And his dear wife would have to pay the cost of the almonds and crumpled sheets, as usual. So he let the driver disappear with impunity; provisionally.

Réal parked his car and drove back to the deadly crossroads. An ambulance was already picking up the young woman's broken body, or what was left of it, to take her to the emergency room of the Centre hospitalier de Lanaudière. The victim appeared to have completely lost consciousness. He followed the ambulance in order to ask a few questions if his condition permitted, and also to make himself available to the family in the unlikely event that the relatives were not satisfied with the overworked official investigators. However, he was careful not to give his name as a witness. In this way, he avoided revealing the registration number to the S.Q. police officers who were questioning witnesses to the tragedy. He wasn't going to chew on his competitors' work! That would be absurd and destructive to himself. He'd been fortunate enough to be

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there, and if he could take advantage of it... Maybe it was a sign of Fate.

Suddenly, in the hall of the hospital, he saw a panic-stricken, pale man with untidy clothes. He was the victim's husband; He seemed to be much shaken by the accident. As soon as he saw her, Réal realized that his face was not unknown to him. He had already spoken to her at a meeting of the City Council; It was a matter of negotiating an increase in the business tax. They had familiarized a few times afterwards. But he couldn't remember his more or less exotic surname.

—Ah! It's your wife!

—Yes, said the distraught man. What is it like?

—I think she had already lost consciousness when she was brought here.

The man rushed into the room where two policemen were waiting for her to come to her senses. Réal could catch a glimpse of the scene through the half-open door. The husband leaned over her, pushed aside a few plastic tubes, and kissed her on the forehead, saying:

—I love you Aïcha. Please come back to us! I need you and so do the kids!

It was very moving. But a nurse asked her not to stay too long. He turned to the police.

—What happened?"

—A traffic accident...

—You mean blood circulation?... heart problems?

—No, not at all... Mobile car traffic... A car ran her over! The driver ran away. No further information is known at this time.

The husband seemed furious to find that no one knew anything. He left the room and approached Réal. He was crying:

—If I remember you rightly, Monsieur Vadeboncoeur, you are a private investigator?"

—Yes!

—Could you take this matter into your own hands? I feel like the police don't give a damn.

Réal felt his lungs swell with immense pride.

—With pleasure... Mister...

—Bouriane... Nasser Bouriane.

—With great pleasure, Mr. Bouriane. I'm taking charge of the investigation right now.

The husband seemed satisfied. He picked up his cell phone and checked something.

—We'll talk about the conditions as soon as possible

—Yes, yes, there's no hurry!

Réal was so flattered and happy that he almost agreed to work for free.

—Thank you, Inspector Vadeboncoeur. I am sure that a man like you will be able to shed light on this horrific accident that strikes my family right in the heart.

Réal's eyes lit up with an indescribable good joy. This man even remembered of his name! He already loved her because we always love those who reflect a beautiful image of ourselves. He, who thought he was despised by all, felt happy, even though he knew in his heart that he did not deserve this rank and praise. Praise flatters us all the more because we feel it undeserved; How contempt outrages us, especially if it is deserved.

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You can count on me! I'll do the impossible!



●4●

A certain Mr. Bouriane

When he returned home, Réal decided to call Albert Tremblay, one of his friends at the Institut national de Nicolet, whose career with the MontRéal Metropolitan Police was going smoothly. After the courtesy preliminaries, he got to the heart of the matter:

"Hey Albert, could you find me the owner of the Buick with license plate JSG 542? Thank you, I'll pay you back!"

While drinking his black coffee the next day, Réal came to a halt in front of the headline of the Joliette newspaper, L'ACTION, which announced, in five columns on the front page, that the victim Aïcha Bouriane had, in fact, been murdered at the time of the accident, "a bullet had been fired into her chest," according to forensic doctor Pierre A. Bourgeault.

"The accident is really a camouflaged assassination, and not a run-and-run," murmured Réal, looking at himself in the drawing-room mirror.

It was at this point that he remembered that he had indeed noticed two heads in the old Buick. The car had pulled onto the opposite sidewalk and the passenger had probably taken the opportunity to discharge his firearm into the young woman's chest. Since there was no one on the sidewalk except the victim, and the detonation had been lost in the roar of the accident, no one had noticed that a crime had just been committed. And then, some badly tuned engines sometimes make firecracks of misfires that look very similar to those of firearms!

Réal's brain was trying to dissect each hypothesis according

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to the rules of pure logic, when the phone rang.

—Hello!

—Yes, replied a voice at the other end.

—It's *Réal Vadeboncoeur*?

—Yes! *Who's on the device?*

—This is *Albert Tremblay*. *You're okay?*

—Hi *Albert*. *Yes, and yourself?*

—*Did you get my recorded message? I queried the general file. It's a stolen vehicle.*

—*Oh no!*

—*Yes. It was stolen in Dollard-des-Ormeaux yesterday morning.*

—*Tabarnouche! Just before the crime. It's unfortunate. I had high hopes for this information.*

—*Yes! We're going to have to look for another lead.*

It was a stolen car. No Luck! His trail was lost in the fog. Where to go? What should I do? Who to look for? *Réal* felt completely distraught; embarrassed like an amnesiac who has to find his way back. Decidedly, he preferred to investigate the simple cases of stolen bicycles. Nothing too exciting, but at least he didn't feel overwhelmed by his own inadequacy.

He decided to pay a little visit to *Bouriane*, the victim's grieving husband. Fifteen minutes later, he was sitting in *Nasser's* empty restaurant.

—*I couldn't stop crying... all night long.*

That's terrible! The children, I sent them to school this morning.

—*Already?*

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—Yes. It's best not to interrupt their life routine. I warned their teacher to be more lenient with them.

—Can I ask you something?... Do you have enemies?

—I don't know if I should tell you...

—If you want me to move forward with my investigation, perhaps you should let me know.

—Yes, I understand... Well!... The mafia... The MontRéal mafia wants to get their hands on me.

—The grappling hook?

—Yes. She wants to "protect" me from...

... against herself?

—That's right!

—How long has it been going on?

—About two months... They came six months ago to tell me that... Eminent dangers threaten my restaurant...

—Imminent,...

—Imminent? What do you mean?

—Imminent dangers... not eminent!

—Yes... anyway... and that, if I want to be caught under their protective "umbrella", I will have to pay \$350 a month for the risks they run.

—\$350! That's huge for a restaurant so... insignificant!

—It's not a restaurant insignificant! It's a good French restaurant with Maghreb specialties: royal couscous, tagines, masfouf, mtabga... Tabarnac! Is that nothing? But I agree, \$350 is huge... And then, I have to pay for the rental of the walls, water, gas and

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Hydro-Québec, the operation of the restaurant, insurance, the waiter's salary, the car costs...

—... and the cook!

—No, I'm the cook! But I still have to live with my two children.

—You know I've always dreamed of being a chef? Réal said with a sympathetic smile.

—Really? replied Nasser. And why didn't you do this job?

—Because I liked police quests even more.

—That's what happens when you're good at everything, commented Nasser Bouriane, keeping an impassive face, perhaps to hide a finger of irony.

—Thanks, maybe that's it. At least, I hope so! Réal modestly admitted, not noticing the whiff of sarcasm that permeated his interlocutor's flattery. So, you were saying that you were contacted by... the Montreal Mafia... For you... "protect".

—Yes, that's it... And I admit that I refused... for I had no means of accepting," said Nasser, wiping his dry eyes with a tissue.

—And that's probably why your wife was killed.

—I have no doubt of it," added Nasser, taking his face in his hands to hide his emotion. By the way, how much will your quest cost me?

—It's hard to say. It will depend on the length and difficulty of the investigations.

—It's promising! I hope you don't put me on the chopping block.

—Don't sweat it. And then, I grant great payment facilities.

—You reassure me, said Nasser, smiling sadly.

•5•

The Mafia?

What to do? Réal had never faced such a thorny problem. He absolutely had to do something so that he wouldn't seem too irresolute, or even just too incompetent. He decided to go to Montreal to consult Albert Tremblay, his policeman friend. Perhaps the latter could suggest an effective process, a sensible course of action.

The very next day, he parked his car in front of his friend's apartment on René Lévesque Street. He was kindly received by his former comrade.

—My client was contacted by the Montreal Mafia. Would there be any way of finding out by whom? Maybe you have informants in this criminal organization?

—When you talk about mafia, Réal, what kind of mafia do you mean?

—Oh no! You're not going to pretend, Albert, that there's no mafia in Montreal?

—Yes, on the contrary, there are a bunch of mafias.

—Really?

—Yes, there is the Italian Mafia, called the Cosa Nostra, but there is also the Haitian Mafia, the Irish Mafia, the Russian Mafia which is starting to dig its hole,...

—Oh my goodness!

—Wait, these Mafias are not the only criminal organizations. There are also the Hell's Angels, the Rock Machines, the Bandidos,... and a lot of street gangs that are almost as fearsome, like the Wolf

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Pack...

—It's a jungle. They have to kill each other to share the profits!

—It rarely happens. You know. Sharks and barracudas do not eat each other. It is always the small fish that serve as prey for them to fatten up. The big mafias are the drug wholesalers; The little bands are the retailers. They also run prostitution.

—But you, the Police, what are you doing?

—In the face of all these gangs of thieves who take advantage of democratic freedoms to violate the rights of Canadians, there are also all kinds of police forces competing with each other.

—What do you mean?

—To fight against these multiple gangs of thugs, there are the SQ, the SPVM, the SRCQ, the RCMP and the CSIS. All of these policies are coordinated by the MSP and CELCO²!

Réal left his friend's house, totally overwhelmed, lost, and distraught like Emile Nelligan's *Vaisseau d'Or* and Arthur Rimbaud's *Bateau ivre*, rudderless. On his return to Joliette, he immediately went to see his client Nasser to report on his investigations.

—Here you are! I got information from the Montreal's underworld. It turns out that it was indeed organized crime that took revenge on you... on your wife, he said, so as not to appear at once unfit and inept.

—It's cowardly!

—I'm not making you say it... For my part, I plan to return to Montreal tomorrow afternoon to get in touch with some police

² •SQ = The Sûreté du Québec. SPVM = The Service de Police de la Ville de Montréal. SRCQ = The Service de Renseignement Criminel de Québec. RCMP = Royal Canadian Mounted Police. CSIS = The Canadian Security Intelligence Service. MSP = The Quebec Ministry of Public Security. CELCO = Coordination of Efforts to Combat Organized Crime.

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informers who monitor organized crime within the various districts. This will help establish who did it. Nasser seemed baffled.

—Are you OK?... You look disturbed, Réal asked.

—Yes. This Mafia gives me cold sweats and goosebumps... I wouldn't want to put my children in danger.

—I would tell my informants to be as discreet as possible.

—And when will you be in Montreal?

—Tomorrow night, I'm going to sleep at the Holliday Inn on Sherbrooke Street West. It will be easier than going to disturb my friend.



The Great Journey to Eternity

Two days later, La Presse (MontRéal) published an article at the bottom of page 68:

"A MAN WAS SHOT DEAD LAST NIGHT IN SAINT-DENIS STREET. HE IS RÉAL VADEBONCEUR, A SMALL PRIVATE INVESTIGATOR FROM JOLIETTE. THE VICTIM IS IN SERIOUS BUT STABLE CONDITION. ACCORDING TO THE ONGOING INVESTIGATION, HE WAS FOLLOWED IN THE DARK AND SHOT ON THE BACK BY A SMITH & WESSON .357 MAGNUM. AT THE REQUEST OF HIS FAMILY, HE WILL SOON BE TRANSFERRED TO THE CENTRE HOSPITALIER RÉGIONAL DE LANAUDIÈRE IN JOLIETTE."

A fortnight later, Réal was released from the hospital for a long convalescence at home. And he found himself in his big marital bed, in that space that evoked for him all his past frustrations, especially in the evening and at night, when the body, and then the mind, become demanding and easily frustrated.

Night and day he tortured his mind to imagine who the hell could have tried to murder him? Only Buryan knew the object of his investigation, but of course it could not have been him. He would not have wanted to eliminate his own private investigator who was trying to help him.

—Maybe he's afraid that the bill for the investigation will go up too high? Of course not!

Who else could wish for his death? It was, without a doubt, one of the mafias; the one who had killed Aïcha and who didn't want a private investigator to come and poke her nose into her crimes.

—But then, he thought, they're going to come back and finish me off as soon as they know I'm not dead.

That night, Réal slept very badly, and so did the following night. On several occasions he felt the repeated attacks of angina pectoris. Obviously, his heart had been damaged by his investigation, and above all, by this attack.

Two days later, he was awakened by oppressive heat. It was as if he was staying in the antechamber of the underworld. Réal opened his eyes and looked at the time on his white radio alarm clock.

—11:00 a.m.! he whispered.

He felt the bed. His wife's place was empty. Marie-France had risen. He had a headache. An overwhelming migraine gripped his skull like a full-face motorcycle helmet. He thought he was calling for his wife, and let out a scream, but the sound echoed in his head and drew a groan of pain from her.

—*I will get up*, he said to himself, in desperation.

He put his feet on the faux red panda fur bed rail, put on his red and black checkered dressing gown, walked over to the door, opened it, and walked onto the landing. A lively conversation came up from the living room below. He began to descend slowly, crossed the middle landing, and paused for a moment on the landing step before descending halfway up the lower flight from where he could see the living room.

—*Here! Here you are! Marie-France is in deep conversation with the children, Jean Philippe, Christine and Paulette.*

Her two daughters squeezed into the large leather armchair near the library, and her son Jean-Philippe in the one facing the television. Marie-France sat in the middle of the sofa, in her usual place. Curiously, there was even Justin and Linda, children Marie-France had from a first bed and who had their own families. This is not surprising. But what deeply shocked Réal was that Gérald

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Prudhomme, his best friend, had taken a seat next to Marie-France, and... Yes! Of course!... he held her by the hand...

—Ah! I'm taking him red-handed, that idiot! So there's something between them! I should have suspected that, with his saucy air, it was not for me that he frequented us. We're going to have to put it in order!



●7●

The Invisible Man

Réal remained motionless, at mid-flight of stairs, contemplating the desolate spectacle of his misfortune. Curiously, no one noticed him. The conversation was going well.

—*It's raining cats and dogs. We Réally have a rotten summer,* says Marie-France.

—*You can say that. A summer like we haven't seen in a long time.*

—*If he were there, Réal would say that Quebec needs tourists, and that it is not the rain that will attract them,* added Marie-France.

Everyone laughed.

—*Marie-France! Stop talking about Réal. On the one hand, he was getting on your nerves; you've told me so a hundred times; And on the other hand, you can't stop thinking about him all the time.*

This comment horrified him. How could his best friend talk like that about him, and his own wife.

—*Darn! What a honeyed hypocrite! "What a scoundrel!"* thought Réal.

The most extreme interjections jostled each other in his mouth, which was wrinkled with rage. There is no need to list them here, but one can easily imagine the worst, and Réal's repertoire was one of the richest in this field. Curiously, if his French vocabulary remained poor in spite of his sincere and authentic efforts, his glossary of swearwords had been outrageously enriched by fits of exasperation and outbursts of anger. Some men wear mustaches or beards to appear more virile, others feel that they are achieving the same result by hurling blasphemous imprecations to the four

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winds.

Réal would have wanted to throw himself at this hypocrite and punch his face, at least that was the idea that crossed his mind. To put it more bluntly: his behavior almost went off the rails. Surely, he no longer needed an enemy with such a friend. He who, until then, had completely trusted this individual! He refrained for the moment from going to see her punched on the nose. But he lost nothing by waiting!

—What is he doing here, at my house?" with my wife and kids while I sleep... What effrontery!

No, his entrance on the scene had to be calm, dignified, admirable and even sublime. He had to keep his composure, approach him without a word, but with an impassive face to trigger a panic in Gerald that would cover him with shame and ridicule. Thus Marie-France would see what rotten wood this man was made of. This pretty heart must run away from him, without he, Réal, even having to strike him. Marie-France would find that this Gerald was nothing but an odious coward, a contemptible coward, and that she loved him for no good reason.

This was the end of his acrimonious comments, which became more fiendish from moment to moment to the point of falling into sheer triviality, when Jean-Philippe cut off with a simple sentence the thread of his bitterness and his inner tears:

—Dad wasn't Réally a bad father... But he thought only of his investigations.

—Yes, he was only Réally interested in his profession, commented Marie-France.

—That's true! Paulette added laconically.

But what did they all have, these disgusting people? Why were they spitting on him, in his own house, on his couch, in his

muddles? These children were horribly ungrateful. Children are always ungrateful. That's a fact. Especially if they are expected to be acknowledged. And then they marry and create their own families, turning us into strangers. He had had the painful experience of this with Linda, his daughter from a previous marriage.

It was at this precise moment that Gérard Prud homme leaned over to MarieFrance and held out his lips, without shame, without shame, without reserve! Unable to stand it any longer, Réal descended the last steps of the flight with an angry air. A smirk of irritation crossed his forehead and covered his furious eyes like dishevelled circumflex accents. He darted across the oval living room, slamming his leather slippers on the hardwood floor to get everyone's attention. Above all, he sought to impress his false friend, who continued to perorate on the man whom he had treated only yesterday as an intimate and estible friend. In fact, this Gérard was only attracted to MarieFrance. It was crystal clear now.

Moreover, Réal had often witnessed couples who assiduously frequented each other, to the point that they could not organize the slightest holiday without each other. He'd always thought there must be an eel under a rock. These overly intense friendships hide secret loves, unmentionable, but powerful and eternal. And when one spouse dies, the other throws himself into the arms of the survivor.

As Réal strode across the oblong living room, he noticed, to his surprise, that no one looked up to look at him. Per son! Only the cat Raminagrobis turned his head worriedly. Worse still, Gérard Prudhomme imperturbably continued his hypocritical peroration, attracting everyone's attention and attention like a magnet. They all seemed bewitched. Then Réal exploded with anger as he inveighed against Gerald:

—What! That despicable weasel! No sooner have I turned my back than you come to play the master of my house,... wallow in my

Sucker Trick in Joliette

armchairs,... rub up against my wife,... or worse,... Use my stuff, my car! And then what? Why not my bank account... And you push my children to criticize me, to despise me? It's a disgrace! I don't want to see your face in me home, like a hypocritical false token, a devious scoundrel of your kind... If you try to ignore me, you won't ignore me for long!

And as he said this, he drew up his gnarled fingers, as long as the legs of an angry spider, to strangle it, to break that treacherous neck. But to his surprise, his hands closed on the void. He opened them again to take up the neck from which all these horrors, all these criticisms had issued. Once again, his hands grasped only the air. A great panic seized him in the guts. All these images of his family and of that accursed Gerald were therefore immaterial... like a nightmare! They were all ghosts and only he, was a living being. He then moved to his beloved wife's face to touch her lips, but his hand slipped through.

Horrified by this, Réal began to tremble with fear, and before his helpless eyes, his family rose to their feet.

—*Well, I'm going to work*, Gerald said, after kissing MarieFrance on her lips. I love you and I'm so happy that we finally found each other in complete freedom. Our secret affair had lasted too long!

—*One man's misfortune is another's happiness*, added Paulette, without smiling.

She did not seem to approve entirely this demonstration of feelings between her mother and Gerald.

—*Poor Papa had many faults*, said Jean-Philippe to Gerald, *but he was a good father all the same. And as such, I claim the right not to call you Dad.*

—*You may be right, Jean-Philippe. I would have loved for my children to call me Dad, but if you feel any reluctance, you can call me Gerald. Simply! Later, when you see that I am a good father, you may want to grant me this pleasure!*

Jean-Claude Castex

—*Perhaps*, admitted Jean-Philippe, out of kindness rather than conviction.



●8●

Cuckold and... unhappy!

Réal was devastated. It was not they, the immaterial ones, but himself! So what was going on? It was he, Réal, who had become a spirit, a ghost.

And then, little by little, the events of the previous days came back to him in snippets: the magnifying glass in the streets of Joliette, the pistolet in MontRéal... the shock in the back. He had probably been hit by a projectile... And then nothing... He was dead... death. No doubt. It is usually said that in order to leave a better memory for those around you, it is better to die before you have had time to disappoint them, i.e. not too old. But he, for his part, had left too soon, long before he had time to leave a good memory. What a disaster! He had totally, absolutely, completely lost consciousness. He had no doubt passed the stage of embalming, and — he sent another shiver down his spine — he was going to undergo his funeral without fanfare because... He would not be entitled to the presence of the representatives of the police union and their service of honour... This regret gripped him. He felt a certain shame at this absurd vanity. He had heard that the entrance into life, the birth, was a terrible shock to the human being, but he found that the exit was very easy; painless. Without us even noticing. And to think that the living are generally so afraid of death! What's the point?

And so, thought Réal again, things had gone so fast. No sooner is he dead than Gérald takes his place. The wretch! The false brother! In fact, he sometimes had to camp out within the walls and serve as a conjugal substitute, for his profession, which was very demanding, frequently kept him, Réal, in surveillance or tailing in Joliette or MontRéal. This is the result of a whole career

in the fight against crime. Cuckold! He was just an unfortunate cuckold! A shabby cuc! His children may not even have been his. That's why they were so kind and understanding to Gerald! There's no doubt about it!

The children left for school. The two lovers resumed their seats, still warm, too hot, on the sofa.

—I knew that Réal couldn't make you happy. I knew it! Gérald murmured, kissing Marie-France's hand.

—Fool! Réal fumed. *Moron! Hypocrite!*

—He was very friendly but too selfish...

—Jerk! Réal added, striking Gerald's face unnecessarily.

—He always disputed to spend money for no good reason. He used to say: "One must always be able to live for six months without any salary; in case of a hard blow! And he piled up, piled up like Séraphin Paudrier..."

—That's absolutely true! said Marie-France, thoughtfully.

—And without Réalizing it, he was saving up for me who was going to take over from him in his own slippers...

—You're too cynical, Gerald. Stop yakking and mocking about poor Réal, who isn't even cold.

—I'm not yakking and mocking! I simply note the irony of fate that makes Réal deprive himself, and deprived you, of a thousand immediate pleasures, supposedly to take them later, without Réalizing that he was involuntarily saving all these pleasures for me, for his successor who would take his place in his wife's bed...

—In his wife's heart! corrected Marie-France, horrified. *Yes you're right! He was working hard. He was unconsciously sacrificing himself for a profiteer without morals, who remained in the shadows, ready to take advantage of a misfortune that would befall*

Sucker Trick in Joliette

him... to steal his belongings, his wife and his possessions. You're just a scavenger...

—You're being hard me, Marie-France!

—So shut your big mouth, Gerald! I'm tired of hearing you make fun of my ex, who disappeared while doing his duty. You make me feel guilty with your stupid accusations! Next to him, you're just a shabby parasite... who takes advantage of the property of a missing person,... who seeks to monopolize his wife... You even wear his own slippers. You're a common parasite...

—Calm down, Marie-France. Relax!

—You're taking advantage of your vicious blue eyes and your dirty little seducer's face to score women who are not yours, and you think you are more respectable than husbands...

—Listen Marie-France... It's not fair! It takes two cheaters to beget a cuckold!

And so saying, Gerald, offended, went out, slamming the door.

—Well done for this idiot! Réal exclaimed, going to caress Marie-France's cheek. He got his money's worth! Congratulations, honey!

Réal was in heaven! Well... You understand what I mean! Stupid Gerald thought he was a winner simply because he had lived longer than his rival. Réal wondered if this isn't always the case with the elderly. Seeing their enemies or their jealous ones die, old men feel like they are taking revenge. As if Providence were proving them right: "*You see, my dear fellow. You're dead and I'm still alive! I've had the last word!*"

—What a fool, that guy! He makes me feel guilty for pleasure! murmured Marie-France, who was left alone in the drawing-room.

—And vlan! Take that on your nose! Réal rejoiced, looking at the

door through which Gerald had gone.

She finished her coffee with an angry gesture and walked out, too. Réal found himself alone. Alone! He was proud of his dear Marie-France, who had been able to nail the beak of this idiot. She had shut his aboiteau – that was their favourite expression ever since they had camped in Acadia – in no time at all. Réal was seething with anger, and an outburst of love carried him spontaneously to MarieFrance, who had defended him so well against this ridiculous paltoquet.



●9●

The Archetype of Mismatched Couples

Réal sank back in his favourite armchair; the very one he loved the most between his shifts. There he spent his few minutes of rest reading *L'ACTION*, the local newspaper, and listening to the news on Radio Canada television.

But no sooner had he sunk between the heavy soft leather elbows than he heard a muffled cry coming from the chair.

—Oh! Why aren't you paying attention? Can't you see that this seat is taken?

He jumped up as if under the effect of a spring, and looked behind him. A lady who looked to be in her thirties sat in the chair:

—Oh, I'm very sorry, ma'am. I didn't notice you!

—Not noticed, not noticed! Where do you have your eyes anyway...? Are you new to Paradise?

—In Paradise?... But I'm not in Paradise! I'm at home!

—You are in Heaven, my dear fellow! Mort! Kaput! Dead! Deceased! Muerto!

Réal felt a shiver down his spine. So, he was dead; without even Réalizing it. He thought that death had always terrified him. For nothing! When you're on earth, you're afraid of windmills. We make ourselves suffer by fearing death, when we are alive and should be enjoying life. And you have to die to understand that death is sweet; A refuge, a nest cradled in calm and serenity.

—I know, I know... You didn't know that... You suspected it but weren't Réally sure. Good day, my name is Geraldine... I watched you long before you died. I used to come every day to see you live.

Jean-Claude Castex

—Hello Geraldine. My name is Réal.

—I know, I know.

—Ah? And why did you come to see me live?

—I liked to see you with your wife.

—You were always at work and only spent a few hours a week with her.

—Yes. But why were you here so often?

—Because I liked to watch you. You were the archetype of couples who constantly bump into each other and take advantage of the rare moments of intimacy to quarrel.

—But I don't see what could have made you feel better about our absurd behavior.

—In fact, this is the very behavior of mismatched and somewhat inconsistent couples.

—Thank you.

—No, don't be offended. Humans use a very fertile imagination to make themselves miserable. You'll see for yourself now that you've joined the club...

—The club?

—Yes, the club of the dead,... Paradise... In our Christian Paradise...

—Ah, you're a Christian?

—Yes. In our Christian Paradise, we spend most of our time singing the glory of God...

—Isn't it boring?

—Not at all. Happiness is in the head and not in what we do... But

Sucker Trick in Joliette

some, like me, who are less mystical, prefer to spy on humans in their daily behavior.

—Are you the only one in this house who observes the living in this way?

—Not at all. There are quite a few of us. Open your eyes, what the heck!

—What the hell?

—Excuse me, this is not a place to invoke such a personage.



●10●

The Blessed People of the Chosen Ones

Réal glanced round and saw several whitish shadows collapsed in the armchairs, sofas and divans, others standing in the corners, like hermit crabs in their shells. Some specters, like owls on the prowl, had even perched on the beams of his house with the pointed roof of an alpine cabin. All these human forms were dressed in loose white togas. Their faces were about thirty years old. The hair had also regained the natural colors of its youth.

—It's Réally surprising, Réal thought, to see that the dead are all around us, watching us with interest. But everybody seems to be in their thirties. Where are the old people? And what about the children who died before they reached that age?

—In the Paradise of Christians, everyone is in their thirties; the prime of life.

—You mean there are several paradises?

—Of course. God is infinitely just. Whatever way he is worshipped, and however he is called: God, Allah, God, Yahweh, Theos, Dios, Mungou, Tanri, Geovah...

—Enough! Enough!

—Well, God appreciates and rewards those who follow the precepts of their religion. Sometimes there are significant differences.

—How curious!

—The differences are indeed very significant... And so are the requirements, for that matter.

—The requirements?

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—Yes, to reach heaven.

—Ah?

—Yes, for Catholics, it is better to be poor because the rich have a very hard time getting through the door. "It is more difficult for a rich man to enter the kingdom of heaven than for a camel...

—... to pass through the eye of a needle. I know, my mother told me that many times. It's ridiculous!

—She probably wanted to make you a proletarian... Yes, the rich man is considered to have stolen most of his wealth from his fellow human beings.

—And the Protestants?

—Among Protestants, on the other hand, it is easier, in spite of certain recommendations in the Old Testament. Rather, the rich are considered blessed by God. On the other hand, the poor are seen more as "poor" people.

—Lazy people?

—Without going that far... Let's say, people who have not been able to develop the talents that God has given them... as in the parable of the talents.

—Yes, I see. It's not very flattering! And that is why it does not make it easier for them to enter Paradise.

—What about Jews and Muslims?

—The Jews are more like the protes... As for the Muslims, the Qur'an forbids them certain things such as... interest-bearing loans; like the Old Testament, for that matter.

—I've never read that in the Old Testament.

—Then you will read with great interest the 24th chapter of Deuteronomy. It commands Christians and Jews: "If you pawn to your

neighbor, you shall not enter his house to seize the pledge, whatever it may be... And if he is a man of humble condition, you shall not go and keep his wages; You shall give it back to him at sunset. Without a pledge, which usurer would agree to lend money?

—And if Islamic banks forbid lending at interest, and Christian and Jewish banks come up against the biblical prohibition of pawnbroking, how do they get rich?

—Islamic bankers find subterfuges to disguise interest under another name. As for the Jewish and Christian bankers, they try to forget this contradictory precept, which they consider inopportune and anti-economic.

—Bankers are all the same. They give themselves free rein in spite of their sacred Book.

—If you can call it "frank". But they will have plenty of time to pay for their mistakes and impostures in the other world, for here no one is favored. Everyone is equal before God. As long as you practice your obligations, you are good for Heaven. Have you imagined the opposite?

—What are the obligations?

—For Christians, to love one's neighbor as oneself...

—It's quite a program!

—You are right!... For Muslims, the five daily prayers, alms every day, the phrase: "God is God and Muhammad his prophet", lent once a year, pilgrimage to Mecca once in a lifetime.

—It is still easier than among Christians, especially Catholics, who are forced to take the most difficult rocky paths to reach Heaven. They have to submit to incessant privations which can ruin the health of the most enthusiastic adepts, especially if they wear silicas to mortify their flesh...

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—You seem to know a whole lot about different religions!

—Sir, it is fourteen centuries since I died. Apart from praising God and singing from time to time in the Choir of the Elect, I have plenty of time to observe the practice of the different religions in the Inner Circle and the rewards here in the Hereafter. I don't have to do anything else to distract myself.

—That's true. I hadn't thought about it.

—I could easily get a Ph.D. in comparative theologies. In addition, I love observing people who are struggling with their daily earthly worries, with the same spouse for a lifetime... What is surprising is the mass arrivals caused by fanaticism on earth... first of all, the crowds of early Christians given over to the wild beasts by the Romans. Then as soon as the Christians dominated, they began to fight against the Muslims who sought to force them to convert; then the crusades to liberate the Holy Land continued for centuries, as if it needed to be liberated.

—So many useless wars!

—The Christians did not succeed in driving the Muslims out of Jerusalem and the Holy Land... So they started fighting among themselves, as if to let off steam from their failure... It started at the end of the Middle Ages, at the time of the Reformation... and in the name of God! I can tell you that God was furious. He fumed from morning till night...

—A holy wrath..." But you're not always here watching us, are you? What do you do at other times?

—We visit the people we have loved on earth!

—Ah! And how do you do it?

—While they are sleeping.

—In their dreams?

—Yes, or even during the day, we inspire them on the path to follow.

—Very well! And other than that?

—We praise God through prayers, songs... especially songs!

—It must be beautiful, a choir made up of thousands of singers... And then, all the tenors, singers, divas, all the virtuosos who arrive in heaven must have a guaranteed place in the celestial choirs?

—My dear sir, you would be surprised. The artistic community is not well represented in these blessed places.

—Ah! So it confirms the prejudices that the so-called right-thinking people display on earth. That's too bad. Yet they are the ones who bring good luck, charm, grace and voluptuousness to earth.

—*Brevis voluptas, dolor perennis.*

—Excuse me, dear angel, my French is rather mediocre?

—"Brief is voluptuousness; Eternal is the sufferings." Ignorant! It's Latin.

—My schooling is so far away... Are you saying that voluptuousness damns us?

—According to all Catholic precepts, yes! replied the archangel, shaking his head. Sacrifices are the only actions paving the way to Heaven.

—It's hard for Christians!

—Don't tell me that you are ignorant of all these precepts.



●11●
Paradise

—*In any case, these celestial choirs, of which you spoke earlier, must be sublime... Réal added to change the conversation.*

—*Tell me about it!*

—*But, no doubt, it takes a hell of a choirmaster to lead the hymns and psalms in unison.*

—*During the mass arrivals of slaughtered Christian, for example after St. Bartholomew's day, after the massacres of Beziers during the Albigensian Crusade, or the Damascus massacre³ God was very angry, because everything was done in his name... as if he were just a gang leader.*

—*I readily believe that.*

—*For example, in Béziers, Arnaud de Citeaux, who wanted to be sure that no Albigensian would escape death, ordered everyone to be massacred, even those who were not Albigensians; to make sure you don't miss any of them.*

—*This is a terrible thing.*

—*In fact, he was simply following the instructions of the Bible which commands in Deuteronomy chapter 13:*

"If you hear that in one of the cities that the Lord your God has given you to live in, men and scoundrels of your race have led

³ •In the *Damascus Massacre* of July 9-18, 1860, the Druze Muslims slaughtered 20,000 Christians across Lebanon, including four to six thousand in Damascus. Thousands of Christians were saved by Emir Abd el-Kader (1808-1883). In the *St. Bartholomew Day Massacre* (1572), 10,000 Protestants perished across France at the hands of the Catholics. In the *Massacres of Beziers* (1209), 7,000 perished (half of Beziers' population). Religions are a source of hatred rather than love.

their fellow citizens astray, saying, 'Let us go and serve other gods,' you must put to the sword all the inhabitants of that city. Thou shalt gather all the spoils of it in the middle of the public square, and thou shalt set fire to the city with all its spoils."

—I find it hard to believe that God could have given such directives!

—It's written in the Bible, my dear! It was the prophet Joshua who received this divine message.

—Joshua was a warlord. A warlord finds subterfuges to subjugate his army and impose his will on it. Arrogating to himself the authority of God to force his fellow men to obey is a universal tactic because chains are never stronger than when they are in the head and in the heart.

—You may be right!

—And then there were the Jews!

—Yes, and the Jews, it's Réally a whole poem in themselves!

—What do you mean?

—They are accused of a crime they could not have committed, since twenty centuries have elapsed since it was committed.

—That's crazy! But, correct me if I'm wrong... Christians, too, are accused of an even older misdeed.

—Which one?

—Original Sin. Because Adam and Eve took a bite out of the apple. Even today they must be cleansed of this sin by baptism.

—This is true, but the sin is automatically washed away and erased by this sacrament.

—Not quite erased since the punishment continues.

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—*What punishment?*

—*Yes, women still give birth in pain, and men have to earn their living by the sweat of their brow, instead of letting themselves live without work. And to make matters worse, they must die and return to dust...*

—*My Goodness, for a policeman, you have a pretty thorough religious education,* said the archangel with admiring eyes.

—*In my time, primary and secondary schools taught catechism.*

By examining the landscape with great attention, Réal was able to distinguish thousands of human and animal forms creeping among the living, in the streets, in the woods, on the beaches and in the houses. There were more ghosts than humans beings.



●12●

The Divine Judgment

Réal was at this point in his surprise when an angel came to subpoenaed him to go to the ceremony of the Particular Judgment⁴. He was to be assigned, for Eternity, a level of happiness or suffering that corresponds precisely to its merits or his misdeeds, in Heaven or in Hell, for what he had done during his life.

He followed Gabriel, for it was he, the archangel messenger, who had come to summon him to this great event. They passed through a countless number of French gardens and luxurious rooms that Réal found a little ostentatious, to finally arrive at the *Palace of Particular Judgments* where was sitting none other than... the Eternal Father. Unfortunately, Réal had to satisfy himself with listening to His solemn and powerful voice, which resonated with the depth and resonance of a bass drumbeat, or better, a thunder roll. Not being a proper full-fledged Chosen One, he couldn't see the Supernatural Being with his own eyes.

There was a fifteen-year-old girl in the queue who had just arrived with her neck broken:

—*What are you doing here, young as you are?*

—*I just killed myself on a motorcycle in the Côte de Liesse, in Mont-Réal!* the girl replied. *My 'chum' wanted to impress me; He let go of the handlebars. He was driving at breakneck speed...*

—*At breakneck speed!* Réal repeated thoughtfully.

⁴ • *Particular judgment*, according to Christian eschatology, is the divine judgment that a dead person undergoes immediately after death, in distinction to the *General Judgment* (or *Last Judgment*) of all people at the end of the world.

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—*That's the word!*

—*You can say that!*

Previously, debauchees, criminals, swindlers, a public man and a public girl, a tennis coach and a female hostess had appeared. A crowd of secretarial angels were busy consulting all sorts of dusty scrolls of parchment. They were not trying to avoid mistakes on the part of the Eternal Father, whose memory must doubtless show all the infallible characteristics of hypermnesia, but all those secretarial angels were recording the decisions of the Most High. The Paradise Administration seemed as intrusive as those of our ten provinces and our federal government, whose services were unnecessarily duplicative. Réal tried to stand as straight as possible in order to make a good first impression.

—*You are Réal Vadeboncoeur, and you are a Christian, more precisely, from the Catholic subdivision!*

—*Exactly!*

—*Apparently you haven't led an exemplary life, have you?* the Eternal Father said in a low voice that rolled like thunder in the Qu'Appelle Valley.

—... [silence]

—*As a child, you stole a lot of change from your parents' wallets, and cheated on some exams?*

—... [silence].

—*You say?*

—*But I was... "Minor," he murmured.*

—*Did you say something?*

—*Yes!*

—*What?*

—*I said "I was just a miner!"*

—*It has nothing to do with it. You knew you were doing wrong and it's all there!*

—*Ah!*

—*From your teenage years on, I see that you have led a pretty unbridled moral life.*

—*Réally?*

—*Yes, besides, you've cheated on your wife, at least in spirit, a few months after you got married!*

—*Only once...*

—*That's one time too many. The Catholic code of ethics is very severe in this area, and you have violated it! I am bound to refer to it!*

—*Ah!*

—*Stop finessing around! Your conscience seems a little complacent... It's time to foot the bill. Catholics insist on the obligation of a strictly irreproachable sexual life. You will have to spend some time in Purgatory to wash away your past mistakes, before you are admitted to Paradise.*

—*There you go! Alea jacta est! His fate was set. He was going to have to purge his soul of past sins. He considered himself fortunate to be transferred to Purgatory. The Great Judge had so decided. On earth, he had always been careful to keep a safe distance from judges, and especially from lawyers, those mercenaries of lies. You never know. But this time, he wasn't asked for his opinion.*

He was well aware that the Catholic religion was riddled with moral obligations that were difficult to follow. He probably should have thought about this beforehand and chosen a less restrictive religion, such as Muslim. He had seen so many hooligans, drug

Sucker Trick in Joliette

dealers, murderers and purse snatchers of old Christian women, lead lives of scum, and then, when old and near death, murder a Christian shouting Allahu Akbar, only to be killed, forgiven, and end up in Muslim Paradise with pretty girls. Leaving the vast Palace of the Last Judgment, he heard the Eternal Father questioning a Muslim, and as he walked away, he tried to listen.

—*You're Ali Boubakeur and you're muslim... of the Shia subdivision, to be precise.*

—*That's right!*

—*You had four legitimate wives and eighteen children.*

—*Yes!*

—*But you have done nothing to educate your children. Were your wives the ones who had to work twice?*

—... *But... I thought...*

—*In addition, you have had three concubines in your lifetime. You have always respected the obligations of Islam... The five daily prayers, Ramadan,... You even gave alms twice a day, on some occasions... That's great!*

—*Yes, replied the Moslem, smiling.*

—*That's great... Very well!... Oh!... Oh!...*

—*What?*

—*You've had a glass of alcohol...*

—*Well, well, well! I don't remember!*

—*Stop finassing, too! Definitely, men are all the same... Incurrigible.*

—*I beg your pardon!*

Jean-Claude Castex

—Good! I don't consider you worthy of the Jachannam⁵, but you're going to rot for a while in Al-A'Raf!⁶



⁵ •Hell.

⁶ •Purgatory.

●13●

Back to Joliette

Réal could not hear what happened next. He was very surprised to find that all men were judged by the same God according to the rites of their own religion. He, who had hitherto believed that there was only one good religion, his own, of course, and many bad ones, that of others, was forced to admit that his logic had been faulty. It was obvious that a good and honest being could not be damned by God because he had been unfortunate enough to be born into a wrong religion. God was infinitely just.

For his part, Réal now had to wait until the day of his admission to Purgatory, and he decided, to distract himself, to go and observe humans himself. This was how most of the Chosen Humans, among the oldest, managed to kill time. For it was no longer a question, in Heaven, of doing crossword puzzles, sudoku, or wandering on the web like an idle spider. What were his wife and children doing?

In a few strokes of will, he was at Joliette, at 4 Jean-Bosco Road, just at the corner of his familiar street in the residential district of St. Charles-Borromeo. His house hadn't changed. He went into her drawing-room. On the kitchen counter, his wife and children were busy seating a fine plate of shepherd's pie. Her favorite food!

He noted that his portrait had disappeared from the large family frame and another photo was enthroned in its place: that of Gerald! This detail made him giggle not with laughter but with rage. He went up to his room, and, in surprise, nearly fainted when he found that his body was still lying on the bed like an old abandoned cloak. Incomprehensible! Was she going to bury him, yes or no? He went back downstairs, very irritated.

Jean-Claude Castex

Seated in armchairs, reclining on sofas or standing in nooks and crannies, whitish shadows stood motionless, attentively listening and following the existence of the living. If humans had been able to do so, they would have been just as curious to go and observe the World of the Dead.



●14●

Visit to Christian Paradise

Réal decided to take advantage of the delay in the execution of his purificatory punishment⁷ to take an indiscreet and even inquisitive look at the Christian Paradise, in order to appreciate beforehand what would be the most obvious sublime advantages of having led a *impeccable*, i.e. *spotless*, life⁸. Admiring Paradise would certainly depress him less than contemplating his wife and children in the company of the one who was already occupying his slippers and his marital bed.

In the afternoon, as he felt as lost as *Hercules son-of-Zeus* in search of the mysterious *Garden of the Hesperides*, Réal followed Geraldine who was about to take up duty in her *Choir of the Heaven-Chosen*. On the way, they came across an archangel whom Réal recognized as Gabriel; the same one who had issued him the subpoena of appearance for the Particular- Judgment, a little earlier. But what can we say to the beautiful angel except that he was magnificent? This ridiculous banality left the celestial creature totally indifferent, and the Joliettan mistakenly thought that angels and archangels remained impervious —and perhaps even refractory— to vain beauty and physical appearance.

After this courteous prelude, which was intended to attract the attention and favor of the impressive Archangel Gabriel, Réal asked him permission to visit the Christian Paradise, which he hoped to enjoy in the near future, after redeeming the sins and debaucheries of his existence. The archangel willingly accepted this request, which was very curious on the part of a newcomer

⁷ •By being sent to Purgatory for purification, for a certain number of years.

⁸ •From Latin *in* = without + *peccatum* = fault, crime, culpable action.

who was so casual as to allow himself such a supplication to so important a heavenly person. But in Heaven as on earth, fortune favours the bold who know how to seize their chances.

The archangel led him to an astonishing palace whose walls and ceiling Réal could not see, so gigantic were these places. Everything dazzled him with whiteness and dazzling luminosity. The air, traversed by brilliant vapours, smelled of sweet perfumes that intoxicated its quivering virgins with a sublime and ineffable good fortune. On the right, an angelic choir lulled the atmosphere with sounds that fluttered from string to string on graceful lyres. As far as the eye could see, the ground was strewn with thrones, thousands, millions of white thrones, as white as mother-of-pearl, occupied by the glorious Christian Elect. None of these strange beings noticed. They were peering forward at a pre-eminent, transcendent point which seemed to hypnotize them, fascinate them, bewitch them; but in vain Réal searched the window which served as a ceiling, but he could distinguish nothing but a vast incandescent coruscation, which did not blind the eyes.

—*What are they all looking at?*

—*They look to God, Yahve the Most High, Elohim the Almighty,* said the archangel in a low voice. *You're not yet am Heavenly Chosen One, so you can't see Him.*

—*Ah!*

—*As soon as you've finished your sanctification in Purgatory,* the angel added, *you will be able to occupy your throne and see God.*

—*Sublime!* replied Réal, trembling with happiness. *I should start immediately my Purgatory time to finish sooner. Can sanctifying purification only be achieved through suffering!*

—*Yes, poor Réal... Don't hurry, please,* answered the archangel. *It won't be a piece of cake or a walk in a park. Wait for it to come.*

Sucker Trick in Joliette

You'll be there soon enough, believe me!

The man noted with pleasure that the archangel was casually familiar with him. He thought that was a pretty good sign. But his word of caution did not fail to send shivers down his spine. He thought of Petula Clark's song, which so aptly points out that "everyone wants to go to Heaven but no one wants to die." It's illogical but true.

—Always bear in mind that your throne is already reserved, the archangel continued with a gentle smile of encouragement. It will give you hope! That's the only difference between hell and purgatory: hope on one side and despair on the other.

—Thank you for this hopeful advice, Gabriel!

—Besides, in Purgatory, you can appreciate the millions of little lights of different colors that you see there...

—What is it for?"

—Each lampion light indicates a prayer coming from Earth. In hell there is no light except the incandescence of the flames and the red glow of embers.

—Why are these lights different colors?

—To indicate the origin... For example, if someone prays for the dead in a temple or a church, his lampion-light will appear to be golden-pink. In a cemetery, the lampion will be blue-silver. If you pray at home or in your head, your light will be pink...

—Oh, Réally? It's very surprising! It seems so futile...

—Nothing is futile when you're suffering! This is a powerful consolation, so that those who are undergoing this Purifying Hell know that they are not forgotten, and that they can imagine where this assistance and consolation come from.

—I'd like to see and try my throne. Can I see it? It will give me the

courage to endure this infinite suffering of Purgatory.

—No, it's too far from here into the future, because you can imagine that with such an imperfect past, you'll be very far from the front rows. Think of the billions of Chosen Ones who will flock here at the end of time. But at least rejoice that you can appreciate the incredible choruses you can hear from here.

The air vibrated with marvellous hymns addressed to the Most High, the psalms of King David, Solomon, and Moses, sung by choirs of cherubim, choruses of seraphim, and orpheons of angels of all kinds. There were even musical Ensembles of Blessed⁹ who languished awaiting their own canonization. They were looking at *Mother Teresa of Calcutta* with a somewhat envious eye, since she had been canonized in only two years, while, by her own admission, her faith in God was waning. The fluidity of the soprani and alti voices blended perfectly with the vibrations of the harps and the shivering of the lutes to exhale unknown sonorities.

These harmonious resonances were accompanied by cohorts of angel musicians equipped with instruments totally unknown to Réal: widely flared oboes, crooked horns, golden sarrusophones, psalteries of precious wood in a thousand shapes, ebony clarinets set with silver, Hawaiian oukuleles, plaintive bagpipes, balalaikas finely painted with graceful pictures, bassoons with beaks outstretched like belligerent geese, ophicleides gaping like the beaks of hungry fledglings, bugles, emberghers, calaces, gelas, vinaccias, violins, flutes, hurdy-gurdies,... and I must omit some whose names, though mentioned so many times by my inexhaustible guide, refuse to appear on the surface of my poor human memory.

—These instruments, over there, are jew's harps from Turkmenistan, next to them Neapolitan mandolins, Burmese slit drums,

⁹ •Blessed or Bienheureux = souls waiting to be canonized (declared saints in Heaven).

Sucker Trick in Joliette

Cremonese fiddles and even Kabyle mandolas

—Why, dear angel, these Kabyle mandolas? Aren't the Kabyles Muslims?

—Of course they are today, but their ancestors were Christians, and we have many Kabyles here; St. Augustine was a native of Souk Ahras in Christian North Africa, before Islam forced the conversion of everyone.



●15●

Some celebrities.

The hymns followed one another without any pause. These Christians offered God the most beautiful and delicate praises, and God was pleased to be thus glorified by his own creatures. Thus, the Creator of all things could experience the deep conviction that He had succeeded in His creation, even if, on earth, the widespread madness of His creatures seemed to demonstrate that the divine Creator had completely botched His creation.

From the front where he stood, Réal could observe the Chosen Ones, the heavenly Saints. Their radiant faces seemed to be attracted by the same focal point, up in front of them, high in the sky, in a kind of general ecstasy. Despite the somewhat ghostly consistency of their bodies, Réal thought he recognized some of the characters. He saw King Louis IX., whose engravings he had noticed in an illustrated dictionary. He also discerned Jean-Marie Vianney, Agnès Gonxha Bojaxhiu¹⁰, Louis Riel next to Gabriel Dumont, Thérèse Martin, Thomas More, Abbé Pierre and a few others.

—Ah, I'm Réally delighted that dear Louis Riel is in Heaven, murmured Réal, but I still find it a little surprising that Gabriel Dumont is standing by his side. In all fashions, my judgment leads me to believe that there has been some error in the switching!

—And why is that? What did he do so badly?

—You probably know this better than I do, dear angel. From what I know of him, he wielded the winchester more brilliantly than the

¹⁰ •Also known as Mother Theresa of Kolkata. Jean-Marie Vianney was the Saint Curé d'Ars. Thérèse Martin was Sainte-Thérèse-de-Lisieux. L'Abbé Pierre was Marie-Joseph Henri Grouès.

Sucker Trick in Joliette

rosary.

—He fought for his people, for democracy, for freedom, for equality,...

—... and fraternity," added Réal.

—Maybe you could wait until I finish my sentence, Réal! It's the least of the courtesies...

—Excuse me a thousand times!

—One time will be enough! In any case, those who do not defend their rights are guilty of encouraging tyrants to dictatorship.

—Your ideas are forward-thinking,... for an angel!

—It's common sense, Réal!

—And this Chosen One... Mother Teresa of Kolkata... Is she in the right place? Réal whispered, pointing his gnarled index finger at a small woman, whose blue and white veil he recognized only.

—Obviously, you recognize her, despite her beatific rejuvenation... Good! You're a physiognomist!

—Her veil is as recognizable as a national flag.

—That's for sure!!

—But, as for me, I'd have rather thought she was... in hell!

—In hell? You don't think about it! A benefactor of her ilk!

—Has she not been devoured all her life by doubts about the very existence of God?

—Ah, if you could read the minds of men and women, as I did, you would know that all the great minds, the most mystical saints in the history of humanity, have been devastated by the depressing onslaught of doubt.

—Do you mean to say that only the dumbs are inhabited by certainties?

—I won't go that far, because generalizations are always risky and problematic, especially in religious matters.

—Ah?

—The destructive power of this doubt was confirmed to me by Mother Teresa. But she did not go so far as to present the "faith of the charcoal burner"¹¹ as the faith of a simplistic or silly person!

—You reassure me, because I myself have never been touched by the slightest doubt.

—I was convinced... I am very happy about it, my dear Réal.

—Nor by the slightest certainty, in fact!

—That last comment is too much.

—But kings and queens, presidents and emperors—" Where are they staying? Are they entitled to a private residence? I don't see any!

The archangel looked very embarrassed.

—In fact, almost all kings, queens, and heads of state are... in hell, said Gabriel, with a grimace that expressed resignation and embarrassment.

—In hell? ... I can't believe this!... But weren't they kings by divine right?

—Not at all, my dear. This so-called "divine right" was a hoax, and a ninny catcher designed to force naïve and gullible peoples into passive obedience. The strongest chains are the ones that enslave our brains and willpower.

¹¹ •Faith of the charcoal burner = blind faith, no doubt faith.

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—Nevertheless... Some monarchs have made their country great?

—Yes, but by watering the land they coveted without restriction or decency with the blood of the men and women in their charge, they waged murderous wars to build their empires that are only a by-product of their selfishness.

—But all these castles, all these pyramids that make up the tourist wealth of today's countries?

—All these artistic beauties were also built by the sweat and blood of the people for the glory of the vain aristocrats who considered themselves deities. Lucifer didn't do better or worse, he who believed himself to be more beautiful than God. Kings love purple because it hides the blood of thousands of human beings who die for them.

—Yes, I heard that, but I didn't know it was from you... I have been told that the Communists like the same color red for the same reason.... But... Will you find kings in heaven?

—Yes. You've seen Louis IX, but there's also Henri IV.

—And the great Queen Victoria... She must be there too?

—Oh no, never.

—Why not?

—Because she starved millions of poor Irish people to death during the Great Famine, no more and no less than the Burmese junta during the natural disaster of 2008.

—Réally?

—Yes, she also launched her warships against China to force the Chinese to buy their opium. In addition, she let her army attack the Boers to steal the gold and diamond mines of South Africa. The Brits invented the concentration camps in which they left tens of thousands of Boers to die of starvation and cold. Like Hitler!

Jean-Claude Castex

—Oh my goodness!... But wasn't she called "Victoria the Good"? I thought she was a holy woman. It was probably her patriotic flatterers who nicknamed her so.



•16•

And even... Judas Iscariot!

—*Without a doubt. Don't let appearances fool you... See the man at 128th place, over there?* Gabriel whispered, pointing his immaculate white wing in the direction.

—*Yes, who is it?*

—*It's Judas! The famous Judas!*

—*Judas?... You mean Judas Iscariot, the traitor?*

—*Himself! He who sold Jesus, our beloved Lord, to the high priests of Jerusalem for thirty contemptible pieces of gold!*

—*I can't believe he is in Heaven!... I thought he had been damned and was roasting in Hell for eternity!*

—*Think again, my dear fellow. Think again! The text has been incorrectly transcribed. God's mercy is infinite. It is written that repentance entails God's forgiveness...*

Réal was happy and proud that the Archangel Gabriel called him "*My dear fellow*". What an honor! Gabriel was the beautiful, powerful and fearsome archangel who had once mercilessly burned the cities of Sodom and Gomorrah to the ground to punish their inhabitants for indulging in unbridled sexual freedom. With a friend like this archangel in the Heavenly Paradise, he might be able to change seats to get closer to the front row. Who knows! But as he said this, he was ashamed to feel the thrill of ambition in those blessed places.

—*Judas regretted his treachery, continued the great Gabriel, since he committed suicide in despair. He even returned to the Sanhedrin Tribunal his thirty coins of gold which he had received as a ransom*

from the rabbis of Jerusalem.

—Ah, but I'm very happy for him. It's true that in order to destroy oneself, one must regret in a bad way..., I mean "a lot".

—Réal, I advise you to be careful with your language here. If you don't see God, he sees you very well and frowns in annoyance every time he looks at you.!

—Oh, sorry, Gabriel! I'm ashamed and sorry about it...

—I'll take note!

—Correct me if I'm wrong, Gabriel! Suicide is a mortal sin that automatically damns us, isn't it?

—People used to believe that in the past. But nowadays, we know that suicide is determined by a mental breakdown, that is, by a state of momentary insanity...

—You mean, a moment of moral irresponsibility.

—That's it! It is therefore not punishable.

—Well, I'm quite reassured that he did well, poor Judah Iscariot who was so dragged through the mud, despised, scolded and even vilified... while his betrayal was foreseen and planned by the Holy Scriptures of the prophets. It was truly extreme bad luck to be assigned the role of the bad boy, in the general distribution of the Last Supper, while the other eleven were destined to become the pillars of support, the supreme patriarchs, the indispensable saints of Christianity... Although they... weren't necessarily...

—What are you saying there, poor wretch?

—I read that most of the apostles had abandoned their wives and children to their sad fate... to respond to Jesus's Call.

—Did you read that?

—...

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—You don't answer, you, presumptuous young man who dares to denigrate the Founding Fathers of Christianity. But St. John, who was called a "beloved disciple of Jesus," certainly does not fall within the scope of your conceited criticism.

—Why not?

—Because he never took a wife. This is probably why he was the beloved disciple of Jesus.

—He no doubt wanted to keep his virginity, which is so highly valued among Christians, for both men and women.

—Perhaps!

—Yet he raped, I mean he violated...

—Who has he raped, miserable?

—He violated the biblical precept of "growth and multiplication"... And then he was the only apostle to claim the title of "Jesus' beloved disciple," Réal concluded.

The archangel did not answer, and Réal did not dare to speak for fear of hurting him and incurring his well-known wrath: he thought of Sodom and Gomorra, and he wondered if it was not risky to evoke in this way the imperfections and pettiness of the apostles. He also had the idea of mentioning Saint Paul who had committed so many crimes, so many massacres of Christians before converting to Christianity. Réal was right to keep quiet and remain silent, for the angel was beginning to pucker his lower lip as in hours of gloom and bitterness.



•17•

The Thief of Paradise

It was during his visit in the Christian Paradise that Réal was absolutely astonished to perceive, among all these angelic visions, one of these Heavenly Blessed, whose face, covered with scars, seemed rather to evoke that of a horrible bandit. His very mouth twisted into a frightful grin, and his eyes, though in ecstasy like those of others, remained half-closed as if by a feeling other than love.

—*That man, Gabriel? This man?... Over there! With all his bad-boy scars. Is he at the right place?*

—*Yes, Réal. You should never judge anyone by their stakes. This man is indeed what we call here "a Thief of Paradise".*

—*A Paradise Thief! You mean, it's therefore possible to steal places in the Christian Paradise like a free rider in a neighborhood theatre or a stowaway in a luxury cruise liner.*

The archangel seemed a little offended by the ironic tone, but he immediately corrected himself:

—*Yes... This man is a great criminal of the Middle Ages. A leader of the Anglo-Gascon Great Company of Routiers and tormentors. He Réally did the worst that could be done: kill, rape, torture... all. At the time of his execution by the King's executioner... He asked for Holy Baptism. So, he arrived in the Hereafter completely pure; even more innocent than the day of his birth, for you know that baptism erases all the past, including original sin. As a result, he was even able to avoid the torments and trials of Purgatory!*

—*Divine Justice is sometimes disconcerting!*

Sucker Trick in Joliette

—*It seems disturbing to humans. But God sees further. The great and sublime Paul of Tarsus...*

—*Saint-Paul?*

—*Yes, St. Paul. Well, this famous Saint Paul¹² was also a great criminal before he became a holy man.*

—*A great criminal?"*

—*Yes, yes, my dear fellow. He happened to be living in Jerusalem, where he was conscientiously studying the Holy Scriptures to become a rabbi, when the Roman occupiers condemned to death and executed the first of the Christians, Jesus himself. Well, Paul of Tarsus then organized vast pogroms in Jewish circles in Jerusalem for the sole purpose of massacring all Christians and their families.*

—*Oh, Réally?*

—*That's the strict truth. The massacres ravaged the streets of Jerusalem for days and days. And paradoxically, after the conversion of Paul of Tarsus on his way to Damascus to massacre the Christians there as well, it became impossible for him to reside in Jerusalem where he feared for his life at the hands of the Christians who wanted to make him pay for his crimes. That is why he undertook all his travels in Greece and Asia Minor to convert the Jews and Gentiles of these regions.*



¹² •Paul (also named *Saul of Tarsus*; c. 5 – c. 64/65 AD), commonly known as Paul the Apostle and Saint Paul, was a Christian disciple who wanted to be called an apostle. He spread the teachings of Jesus in the first-century Asia-Minor.

●18●

The Gehenne

Uninterrupted, the hymns and psalms lulled the air with sweet fragrances, and filled the atmosphere with seraphic sonorities. At one point, however, one of the celestial choirs took a few seconds to begin the next psalm. This was unusual, and the ecstatic Heaven's Chosen ones noticed nothing. But Réal, who was not yet able to see God the Highest, and who, consequently, had not all his senses absorbed by the prodigious image of the Most High, then perceived, in the absolute silence of Paradise, a muffled rumor, a dull murmur made up of very distant rumblings.

—*What is this?* he asked Gabriel.

—*What?*

—*That dull and persistent hum like the roar of suffering animals.*

—*Ah, I know what you mean... It's nothing!*

—*Nothing? Are you hiding something?*

—*No!... It's... presumably... Hell!*

—*Hell?...*

—*Yes! Gehenna, for Christians unworthy of the name.*

—*Could you take me there, please?*

—*You are crazy, Réal!*

—*I would like to visit these mysterious places in which most people on earth no longer believe. This way, I'll be able to appreciate by comparison the rich benefits of Paradise.*

Gabriel was appalled, and Réal had to insist that he guide

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him to that sorrowful and pitiful place from which these uninterrupted cries and desperate lamentations emanated. He knocked on a heavy, creaking bronze gate. A magnificent devil came to open. Réal was very surprised, for he thought the devil ugly and even repulsive. This strange personage, all feathered in white, curiously brandished a large, beautiful torchiere bristling with candles. With his ever pragmatic and somewhat down-to-earth mind, Réal wondered how all that wax wasn't melting in the infernal heat.

—Hello Lucifer, said the Archangel Gabriel with a broad smile...

Réal wondered: Was Gabriel being hypocritical in showing such cordiality towards the Prince of Darkness? Then he thought that these courtesies and civilities were probably intended to permit the necessary cooperation between them; a kind of celestial diplomatic language. This reminded him how shocked he had once been, when he saw a prosecutor and a defense attorney laughing and toasting each other in a café, five minutes after they'd quarreled and torn each other apart in the courtroom.

—Good day, good day... The day could be good or better, Gabriel? I see you've brought me a candidate for eternal damnation. Ah! Ah! Ah! I am quite delighted and enthusiastic about it.

A shiver of horror rippled down Réal's spine, and, paradoxically, sent a chill down his back; which wasn't so annoying in such a hot place. The beautiful fallen angel reached out with his free hand (the one that was not holding the large torch), to grab him by the shoulder, but the man stepped back, totally terrified.

—No, Lucifer! This man isn't damned! He's just a curious, unusual, and bizarre person, who wants to see for himself how your infernal kingdom works.

—Come in, my little one, into my infamous places, of which I am the unquestionable and undisputed sovereign, because no one has

ever competed for my job or contested my place. In life, you just have to choose a "niche" whose gratifying advantages no one has yet discovered, an original and special way to achieve your ambitions without being bothered by rivals. Here, in Hell, I am never, ever, the target of the ambitious and conceited competitors who clutter your planet. I am as indestructible as those selfish tyrants who make the lives of their fellow-citizens more odious than those of my damned community. As a matter of fact, these dictators are my most regular customers.

—Yes, I understand... In any case, thank you for your very warm welcome, handsome Lucifer! No pun intended! Thanks be to God, I'm just passing through, replied Réal, in a trembling voice. Dictators are, you say, your regular patrons?

—Well, yes! In fact, I have the best sample of world leaders here in my diabolical Museum of Madame Tussaud. As I love history, I sometimes entertain myself by having them re-enact the most characteristic diplomatic scenes in the history of Mankind, with the Réal actors. Not one is missing. The blood on their hands has finally dried in this suffocating heat. Only brown scabs remain. That's the way it is! I love history and theatre, these are my only pleasures today, with the sadistic enjoyment of seeing them suffer. Not wonder, I'm way too old for any other pleasure. I have recently organized hand-to-hand fights with celebrities such as Hitler, Genghis Khan, Stalin, Mao Zedong and many others. I summoned them from their respective hells. I wanted to punish them for coveting the title of greatest serial killer the world has ever known.

—Stalin and Hitler came from the Christian Hell, I suppose.

—Stalin yes... he was a former Orthodox seminarian, but Hitler came from the Hell of the Jews...

—Jews?... He had been sent there to increase his torment tenfold, I suppose?

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—How so?

—Because the Tsadiquims, the martyrs of the Shoah, would no doubt have been delighted to cook up a few expertly-measured torments of fine cruelty.

—No, not at all, Réal. Simply because he was of direct Jewish descent, Lucifer answered.

—I can't believe my ears... What for was he so insanely relentless?

—The greatest anti-Semites are self-denying Jews.

—It's disconcerting!... I never knew this aspect of racism... These battles between tyrants must be very exciting. And Comrade Mao Zedong, did he come to confront the other killers?

—Impossible to bring him back, he was from a Buddhist family, and so he was reincarnated as an ascaris.

—Asca what?

—Ascaris! An intestinal parasitic worm.

—Intestinal, so he has to live in the same filth he imposed on his people for 25 years!

—And he will remain there until the end of eternity.

—Not very clever! Eternity has no end... by definition.

—Well, I understand myself..., said the man. By the way... if material goods still appeal to you, I'd advise you to make a short film with these epic fights between politicians-mass murderers; a film formatted for the small screen. I am sure that the global networks would offer you fabulous sums of money.

—No doubt they would. But you know, the money here...

—Yes, I understand. A drop of fresh water is worth more in hell than a gold bar... But, tell me, all these famous tyrants must fight

Jean-Claude Castex

with great energy?

—You'd be surprised. They, who have exterminated millions of men, show less courage than the most cowardly Saskatchewan prairie dog when they have to give their all, in single combat.

—I thought so. It reminds me of a certain President Bush who started two wars but refused to go and fight in Vietnam. The 1982 Canada's Constitution should be amended to force politicians to fight on the front lines when they start a war. There would be general and eternal peace on earth!

They would find another way. Wars are far too successful for arms manufacturers and big financiers.



●19●

And what about the Daughters of Eve?

Surprisingly, Lucifer, the Hell's angel, was showing the sharpest political subtlety. Seeing his kindness and his somewhat cynical irony, which Réal guessed to be full of sadness, the Quebecois confessed:

—You are so handsome, Lucifer, why should so much beauty be damned for eternity?

—Ah! Ah! Ah! If I'm very handsome, you're very naïve, Réal. Beauty is dangerous. It's precisely because I was so good-looking—in fact the most beautiful angel in Creation—that I was damned... I was more beautiful than God Himself...

—You're embellishing the facts, Lucifer, Gabriel whispered. You THOUGHT you were more beautiful. Nuance!

—Many told me that I was more beautiful, and God was jealous...

—Give me a break, Lucifer! You have a completely skewed and one-sided way of evoking and talking about this event, Lucifer. In fact, you were indeed the most beautiful of the Angels, the Light-Bearer of God, and it went to your head. It's simple.

—Is beauty so dangerous? asked Réal to calm the debate.

—You may say so, my dear Réal, said Lucifer. I can assure you that if Nature grants you too much beauty, you are twice as likely to end up in this place of despair.

—You and your fancy statistics!" said Archangel Gabriel.

—Beauty is the mother of voluptuousness. And too much beauty can be poisonous, you know, because it leads to an exhilarating

voluptuousness, an inordinate pride that has always been condemned by the Fathers of the Christian Church. In the Bible, it's always been linked to the worst and the fall of Man.

—Is it Réally that bad?

—"Brevis voluptas, dolor perennis!" Gabriel added sententiously, raising his forefinger.

—Short is the pleasure, eternal will be your suffering! Réal translated proudly with a smile, because he remembered this latin sentence that was a grammar rule at the Joliette Collège Classique..

—This rigorous and strict precept was once the main purveyor of my Christian Hell," said Lucifer. But today, competition between the different Churches is so strong that sexual practice out of wedlock is no longer condemnable and reprehensible... and all I receive in my Hell are only scoundrels: inveterate pedophiles, rogue bankers, hypocritical preachers who usurp God's moral authority for their selfish ends, rapists... men only. Virtually all women go to Heaven these days. Where are the bygone days when guilt-ridden women came to me in long, uninterrupted and resigned flocks?

—I've been told you don't want any more women," murmured the archangel Gabriel, with a conspiratorial air.

—Listen, Gabriel, they spend most of their time arguing and grumbling about their supposed misfortune. I, who'm not even married, can't seem to feel any longer in control of my own hell. I even went to complain to the Most High. And do you know what he said to me?

—No yet!

—God said to me verbatim, word for word: Listen to me, Lucifer... Okay, lower your dazzling torchere first, you're hurting my eyes! Are you doing it on purpose or what?" No, I replied. "Listen to me Lucifer, if you refuse women, I will have to put them all in

Sucker Trick in Joliette

Paradise. I can't let them sit in Purgatory for all Eternity.

—That's all well and good, cut in Archange Gabriel. But isn't it written: "Qui in deliciis vixerunt longe stabunt, propter timorem tormentorum."

—Those who have lived in delights will depart from them in fear of torment, Lucifer whispered, glancing at Réal to make sure he understood the meaning of the Latin sentence.

—I don't see the connection. Just because women are a source of delight to men, doesn't mean they experience all the same pleasures themselves. Many are faking it. The poet Ovid assures us that many of them are pretending. Besides, the fact that most women find their lives to be a fiasco is not a good enough reason to send them all to Paradise. Certainly, some don't deserve it.

—You'll ask this problem to 'Whom-it-may-concern'. Perhaps the Most High is no longer against the delights and pleasures of life, since He accepts them in paradise in several other religions?... "So, Réal," said Lucifer, who seemed anxious to return to his favourite subject, "it's precisely because I was so beautiful that I was damned. I was the most handsome of angels, as my name indicates; and I'm justly proud of it, I confess. I was the Heaven Light Bearer¹³, the Standard-Bearer. And I Réalized that I was more beautiful than G...

—My poor Lucifer, you spin this in your head from morning till night like a sick obsession. You seem unwilling to change! Gabriel cut in. You're as vain as ever! It won't be long before something very bad happens to you. You're going to get another maltreatment before long.

—Anyway, Gabriel, I can't get any lower!

—Oh yes! You can, Lucifer. You're still the Prince of the Fallen

¹³ •Lucifer means *Light Bearer* in Latin.

Angels and you've kept your beauty that still makes the jealous gossip.

Lucifer, who hadn't quite grasped the threat, gloated in vain pleasure.

—I'd rather be first among the Fallen than the last among the Chosen.

—You're wrong, Lucifer. For you are not the first of the Fallen.

—And who has the honor to be?

—It seems to me that the angel Gaap is more powerful than you; He commands 66 legions of infernal spirits. He is undoubtedly the most powerful prince of the Underworld.

—But he's so ugly with his human body and big bat wings, replied Lucifer.

—In any case, Gabriel continued, I'd advise you to be modest in my presence, because you may still take a few knocks in the feathers, if you don't learn to hold your tongue.

—Ah, and how's that? I'm already in Hell for Eternity! What's the worst you can think of?

—I've just told you, but you're blinded by your childish and sterile vanity: losing your beauty and finding yourself as ugly as Beelzebub, Mephistopheles or Astaroth!

—By all the devils! Lucifer exclaimed, struck with terror. Don't talk about such a misfortune, it would be the last downfall!

—Beauty is intoxicating. It inebriates the spirit of those who receive it, as well as those who, seduced, loses their judgment and become a slave to it. Few are those who do not end up as victims.

—I'm not going to tell you otherwise, Réal!

—You should look uglier!

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—*I wouldn't, even if my beauty should damn me twice.*

—*Twice is unlikely.*

—*All the more reason. By the way, I wanted to tell you, you who are in God's good books. Could you suggest 'au pair' exchanges between the Chosen and the Damned?*

—*Have you lost your spirit?*

—*Only my Holy Spirit! Lucifer joked. I've heard that the Elect who have been in Paradise for centuries are getting tired of King David's psalms being sung over and over again by angelic choirs.*

—*Ah? Gabriel replied; he'd heard of the problem but didn't want to take it into consideration.*

—*Gabriel! Sait It's okay to get tired of the best things. The oldest Chosen become powerless to attain ecstasy! Beings fed on chocolate mousse end up hating this delicacy. Too many vacations, kills the holiday spirit. We get tired of anything that is too abundant. It's human. If there were still exchanges between the Elect of several religions, the diversity of rewards would no doubt renew interest in Paradise.*

—*Perhaps, Lucifer, Réal said, you'd like to give this curious Quebecer a quick tour of Hell so that we can leave as soon as possible. My feathers are Réally keeping me too hot, the archangel invented to switch conversations.*

—*You know that's not true, Gabriel. Feathers keep our bodies at a constant temperature. You forget that I myself am covered with plumage. And I'm not too hot... But, please, Réal, enter my ignoble and disgusting Kingdom!*



The Spectacle of Ultimate Despair

Full of apprehension, Réal followed the beautiful (fallen) angel Lucifer inside, along with Gabriel. They passed through countless entrances, including several chicaned portals designed to mitigate the effects of the infernal heat and muffle the endless laments of the Damned.

—*I Réalize that chicanes lead us to hell*, murmured Réal, without thinking about the implications of his words.

—*That is a very good point. It is chicanes in all their forms that lead to these places!*

The spectacle of Hell struck the Quebecois with full force like a punch of unheard-of violence. It was a mind-blowing vision. Imagine our great Lac-Saint-Jean boiling like a vast cauldron of witches. Emerging from all that boiling water, as foaming as the Lachine rapids, crowds of humans were writhing in pain, screaming at the top of their voices. Some, especially among the oldest of the damned, had worn out and destroyed their vocal cords by screaming so much that they finally lost their voices. No sound came out of their mouths, distorted by immeasurable suffering. We know that true suffering is mute; it's the kind that makes us wish for deliverance through death. But in these tragic places of despair, death was no longer even an option. And we could see bodies waving and undulating like silent seaweed amid the flames, which, paradoxically, rose from the blood-red foam, among the sulfurous fumaroles and flames as sharp as teeth of a carnivore.

—*Do you think we ever get used to suffering?* asked Réal to the handsome Prince of the Hell.

Lucifer observed this terrifying spectacle with a small smile

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that betrayed a certain degree of self-satisfaction.

—Very little. You quickly get used to happiness and pleasure, but not to misfortune, to the torments of despair and suffering!

Here, too, despite the flames and the stifling atmosphere, the Damned were about thirty years old, the age at which they were systematically brought back when they received their fleshless bodies.

—But how can one suffer without having a material body?

—Unhappiness, my dear, is like happiness; it's in the mind. This suffering is one of the mysteries of the Beyond! But we know that, after the last General Judgment, at the very end of the world, human beings will return to their flesh-and-blood bodies.

Faced with such a monstrosity —so unusual that ordinary words cannot adequately describe it— there's sometimes only one thing to do, to let oneself be carried along by the wave of one's bulimic desire to see and hear everything. Réal scrutinized the Damned with attention and horror. Some were fat, others thin; he saw everything: devious financiers and bankers, scoundrel slave traders, rich and poor bandits, even preachers, most of the haranguers and declaimers of television because they had usurped God's authority for their own material gain, pimps who had sold the innocence of young girls, blood-drinking war profiteers, simonious archbishops, prevaricating lawyers whose greed had led to the acquittal of horrible criminals...



●21●

The Unlucky

The Damned all had faces that betrayed their vices. And yet, in the midst of these abject faces, full of infinite evil, a man presented the beautiful face of Good.

—*Look at this man, Lucifer. What did he do?*

—*In truth, not much evil. On the contrary, he always devoted himself, body and soul, to the poor. But, unfortunately for him, he died in a state of mortal sin.*

—*What did he do wrong?*

—*He took a sip of water before going to Communion.*

—*Is that all he did?*

—*What do you mean, is that all? It was, a century ago, an inexplicable mortal sin. And dying in this state leads mercilessly to the depths of Hell!*

—*But drinking water before communion is now permitted.*

—*That's true, but it wasn't at the time, said the hell-angel. And you know that disobedience is an act of pride and rebellion against God. It's serious... very serious.*

Réal remained silent, biting his lips to avoid clumsy obstinacy, for Archangel Gabriel was listening with all his ears, feigning indifference. Or perhaps he was thinking of something else... who knows! Réal's main concern was to avoid aggravating his own case, which would have increased his time in Purgatory... or perhaps worse. Who would know for sure? But his blood as a Quebecker was boiling rapidly. He caught a glimpse of a face that reminded him of someone.

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—*Who is that male Damned in the white cassock and black Dominican cape, over there on the right?*

—*He's a celebrity and I'm not sure you recognize his traits. Where did you see him?* asked Gabriel.

—*In Wikipedia, no doubt. I absolutely adore... I mean... I love to look at the pictures. Who is this guy?*

—*It's Bartholomew de Las Casas!*

—*What? A holy man who saved American Indians from slavery?*

—*Yes, but you know, every man has a skeleton in his private closet... Lucifer said, shaking his head.*

—*But in the end, such a benefactor of Humanity... How is this possible?*

—*It is the illustration of the saying that "the end does not justify the means."*

—*What has he done that is so horrible that he will be damned for eternity?*

—*In order not to ruin the Spanish colonies, which functioned thanks to the contribution of the slavery of the Indians, he advocated the enslavement of the black Africans... Replacing one human being with another is not a satisfactory solution for Christian morality.*

—*But were not the People of the Bible themselves fully slaveholders, asked Réal ingenuously, without Yahweh, full of complacency, ever having condemned this form of exploitation?*

Gabriel immediately puckered his lower lip, betraying a strong sense of dissatisfaction. Lucifer was gloating, and Réal saw fit not to insist.

Brief visit to Joliette

The private investigator spent a few hours or seconds in the Hell of the Christians. Let the reader, who has had the perseverance to arrive at these lines, forgive me for this inaccuracy. In the Beyond, and especially in the Underworld, time no longer exists. No instrument such as watches, clepsydras, hourglasses, gnomons or sundials, can artificially materialize and account for such an abstract concept as time. There were a few beautiful ivory "grandfather clocks" here and there, very finely chiseled, but the hands had been removed so that they could only be used for decoration. What we call *nights and days* are themselves indistinct and blurred, for the *Beyond* does not go round in circles like the *Within*, the world we live in.

Our Joliettain investigator had himself been condemned to an indefinite period of time in Purgatory; the time needed to "purge" himself of all the evil that clogged his soul in order to make room for Good. In addition, he had to suffer an overall amount of torment that was equivalent to the total sum of harm he had perpetrated during his life. Each misdeed was paid for by equal suffering. But the calculations were so complex, so hermetic, so convoluted, that not a single angel, not a single archangel, not even the most intelligent, was capable of performing these delicate calculations and equivalences. The Most High alone could, through His omnipotence and universal Spirit, evaluate these Byzantine equivalences, as elusive as the answers of politicians who want to please all their constituents. Thus purified, the dead became fit for Eternal Happiness and worthy of the Marvellous Paradise that had earlier been offered to the dazzled eyes of the Quebecois.

On the other hand, the mere appearance of Hell had convinced the policeman that he was the most fortunate to be thus

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assigned to this sad Purgatory. This place was probably no more comfortable than Hell, but it at least left him with the only buoy, the precious landmark no longer enjoyed by the Damned: *Hope*. For hope for an end to our torment, and for a better world, is the ultimate support and comfort that allows us to preserve in us the desire to endure without committing desperate acts. This is why, on earth, Stalin the "atheist", who had set himself the goal of destroying God and his Paradise, had taken care to promise in its place a *Singing Tomorrow*. But these promises proved to be as unattainable as an elusive horizon that vanishes as soon as you try to approach it.

Conversely, some prevaricators, some liars, embellish the Hereafter to induce their victims to sterile patience through a vain hope in an eternal Reward.

Back in Heaven, Réal decided to make a brief visit to his home to find out if his body was still resting on his double bed. He was there.

—*But on earth are Joliette's funeral services doing?* he thought.

Why didn't they have his remains removed, embalmed, drained of blood, and his face made up so that it would look less ghastly? His face remained riddled with huge black dots that lifted his wife's heart when he asked her to purge them between her fingernails. Embalmers would no doubt take on this disgusting task. At least he hoped so. Unless they just smear a thick layer of foundation on his face. It was a small satisfaction to him to know that he was going to be buried in the pretty cemetery of Rue Lépine in Joliette with an impeccable skin.

Looking closely at his rather plump body, he also saw that his nose had not been blown. He hoped that the embalmers would do what was necessary so that the relatives who came to kneel against the half-opened coffin would not be unpleasantly

distracted.

He thought back to his death, to the bullet that had punctured his back and lungs and perhaps his heart. He had unwittingly given his life for Justice; so that Aïcha's death would not go unpunished. He could be proud of his generous Destiny... even if he hadn't offered his life with a cheerful heart. In any case, it was a consolation. He was becoming a hero, and if he had been lucky enough to be a member in good standing of the *Sûreté du Québec*, a detachment would have come to make a *Guard of Honour* and give a little parrache to his funeral, as a member of this elite corps. In his satin-padded coffin, he would not hear speeches such as:

"Corporal Réal Vadeboncœur gave his life, generously, and I emphasize this quality, because it is Réally the dominant trait that has guided the career of this police officer. He dedicated his life to the service of others... He will be sadly missed by his dear wife Marie-France and his children JeanPhilippe, Christine and Paullette, and by his colleagues..."



●23●

A long Journey through the Beyond.

—*Oh yes!, "I was painfully missed"...* That's an eloquent understatement! Réal's thoughts escaped this sad commentary to cling to poor Aïcha as an oyster resisting the gobbler's blade. Who could have slaughtered her like that? Suddenly, an idea lit up his cop's inquisitive mind.

—*But since she's dead... and so am I... I wonder if I couldn't go and ask her right here WHO killed her. She certainly saw her murderer, and with a bit of luck she might be able to shed some light on my poor lantern.*

Réal caught a glimpse of Archangel Gabriel emerging from behind a bush. He repressed his urge to tease him by asking what he was doing. Instead, he greeted him gently:

—*Dear Archangel Gabriel, In Joliette, I was an independent investigator.*

—*Independent of whom?*

—*That means I didn't work for the S.Q."*

—*The S.Q.?*

—*Yes, the Sûreté du Québec is our Provincial Police!*

—*Oh! And what do you want to ask me?*

—*Well! The victim, in that famous case that led to my death, must be in Heaven or Hell.*

—*No doubt about it, unless she's in Purgatory, which is more likely than in Heaven directly, women are so imperfect...*

—*Women, only?*

—Men too, don't be offended. But we're talking about a woman, aren't we?

—I didn't think I'd mentioned that. But you can read minds whenever you like... Yes, she is a woman, and I'd like you to help me find her.

—What's his name?

—Aïcha Bouriane. But I don't know her religion?

—She is presumably Muslim. Her name seems to indicate it.

—Here you are? Aïcha is a Muslim name?

—Yes, but also Jewish. Mary is Miriam to Jews and Christians; Ali is Elijah, Youssef Joseph, Suleiman Salomon, Daoud David and Ibrahim Abraham.

—Ah, well! Here you are!

—Your victim must be in the Muslim Paradise or in their Hell.

—How can I get there to check it?

—As it happens, replied Gabriel, the Almighty has accredited me to the three great monotheistic religions of the world. Thanks to God —to all our Gods— I can be just as useful to you among Christians, Muslims and Jews.

—How extraordinary. You're basically in charge of half of Humanity.

—Exactly, said the archangel, standing up proudly and puffing out his chest.

—I appreciate that you devote so much attention to my little person, while every day that passes thousands of human beings give up their souls to God, half of whom are Christians, Muslims or Jews.

—Don't worry, I've got some very zealous and efficient helpers.

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—*You reassure me, because I wouldn't want you to neglect the others and leave them helpless.*

—*Don't worry, Réal. Being at the top of my hierarchy, my life is made up of pseudo responsibilities and leisure, cut in the archangel, blinking his beautiful emerald eyes with pleasure. But yet I appreciate your concern for others. Besides, I intend to mention it to our beloved Highest, on your behalf.*

Réal thought about all the benefits he could gain from this multi-faith, almost ecumenical archangel. All he had to do was show himself in his best light—even force the note to impress him—and the celestial being would be all the more willing to "protect" him with the Most High.

—*Réal, I don't Réally like your current thinking, said the archangel. It's unworthy of you. Don't forget that I can read everyone's soul. You can't just throw smoke and mirrors in my face.*

—*Tab... I'm sorry, Gabriel. It won't happen again, said Réal, blushing from ear to ear, after barely holding back an expletive that would have displeased the immaculate archangel.*



●24●

The Great Hunting Grounds

The angelic creature then held out his hand to Réal and led him with great speed to the Moslem Paradise, a certain distance away. For a long time they skirted along an immense rift as wide as the Grand Canyon, from which emanated laments mingled with howls of fury, pain, and despair. Beyond this gigantic chasm lay the Paradises of many religions. Some had long since ceased to have any followers on earth because all their faithful had disappeared or converted to other cults.

—You see, over there, those are the Great Hunting Grounds of the Manitou God occupied by the Amerindian Chosen of North America.

—Do they still have followers?

—Yes, a few. Most Indians have become Christians. Others still take part in Native celebrations, but this is mostly for tourists or to stimulate Native nationalism. Most don't Réally believe in it anymore. Even though this religion isn't quite extinct, admissions here are rare.

—I see... And that austere rectangle over there?

—Over there, it's the tiny Paradise of Jehovah's Witnesses, but it's already full.

—Ah! Well, well! This is what it means to be short-sighted. And the other Chosen of this faith, what become of them?

—Their Paradise is too small, I said. It contains only 144,000 Chosen Ones. The rest will remain on earth after the end of time in a Special Garden of Eden.

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—*The JW aristocracy will be in Heaven and the lowest faithfuls on earth?*

—*Yes, and the Damned in Hell?*

—*No, the Jehovah's Witnesses don't have a hell, they prefer to eject sinners from their Community, like we get rid of garbage.*

—*Over there, is the Mormon's Heaven. What's special about the Mormons is that they can convert their ancestors, , from other faiths long since extinct. So they cause a great deal of disruptions in the various Paradises and Hells of several religions.*

—*How so?*

—*Yes, it may seem strange. You know that if a Mormon obtains the names and dates of birth of family members who have been dead for centuries, he can convert them to Mormonism and thus give them access to their Paradise.*

—*Thanks to their name?*

—*Yes. As a result, it happens that, from time to time, the Chosen or the Damned have to leave their Paradise or Hell, take their cudgels and head for the Mormon Paradise. Everyone is happy, the Damned are forgiven for their wicked lives, and the Chosen rejoice in changing their happiness, because after a few centuries people grows tired of everything, even of happiness and the liveliest pleasure.*

—*Curious, curious!*



●25●

The Champs-Elysees (*Elysian Fields*)

After a moment's silence, the archangel continued:

—*Over there, are the Champs-Elysees!*

—*Are we getting close to Paris?*

—*No we're not! The Elysian Fields are the Paradise of the ancient Greeks. But no one believes in the precepts of Greek mythology any more, apart from a few wacky eccentric individuals eager for originality, so there are no genuine followers left on earth. As a result, their Paradise is closed. As promised in the beginning, bad weather never saddens the perfect bliss of the Chosen.*

—*It's even better than Corsica, if I understand properly.*

—*Yes, it's Corsica without the...*

—*Without the Corsicans?*

—*No, the Corsicans are adorable.*

—*Without the what, then?*

—*Without the bombs and the violence!*

—*I like that better.*

—*When an ancient Greek died, he would come to the banks of the River Styx, which you can see down there, at the bottom of the abyss.*

—*Yes! I see it.*

—*There was Caron, the nocher of Hell,...*

—*The nocher?*

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—Yes, the boatman, the ferryman... He used to take the dead on board on condition that they had an obol to pay the fare of the passage.

—The Greeks have always been businesspeople.

—That's why an obol coin was then placed in the mouths of the dead; to pay Caron... Down here, below you, see the entrance to Tartarus, the Hell of those same Greeks of Mythology into which Caron precipitated those who had done wrong.

—... or who did not have their obol to pay the cost of crossing the Styx.

—You've got it all figured out.

—If it's a mythology, you mean it doesn't exist anymore?

Not at all; Today, with our Cartesian spirit of superiority, it is classified as a myth, but hundreds of thousands of people have died in this religion. Today, they occupy their Paradises of the Elysian Fields or their infernal Tartarus.



●26●

The Palace of the Fates

Their conversation remained suspended for a few seconds as the archangel and the private investigator flew over a Grand Palace with *mother-of-pearl* roofs and multicolored marble walls: pink marble from the Algarve, white from Carrara, blue-grey from Saint-Michel d'Arudy and red from Saint-Lothaire du Jura.

—*What is this fabulous construction?* asked Réal of his angelic guide.

—*The Palace of the Fates.*

—*Of what fates?*

—*Of your fate and that of all human beings who wander or have wandered on earth. This library contains 80 billion papyrus, ostraca, bamboo blades and dusty scrolls*¹⁴.

—Is that the number of humans who have come to earth?

—*You said it! Some parchments refer to only one day, others form large scrolls that are equivalent to veritable encyclopedias full of data, useful or useless, such as the curriculum vitae of some conceited people.*

They soon stopped there. Réal opened a thin scroll. It was the shortened destiny of a stillborn child. The angel advised him not to try hard to know his own destiny. This excited his curiosity like everything that is forbidden.

—*If you know your Destiny, you're going to be miserable for the*

¹⁴ •A *parchment* is the skin of a sheep or goat prepared for writing on. A *roll* of parchment or paper for writing or painting on. An *ostraca* are flakes of limestone that were used as "notepads" for writing on.

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rest of your life.

—But I'm dead. There is no danger.

Here and there, scores of scribe-angels were plucking their finest feathers, beveled them at an angle and dipped them delicately in shell-inkwells constantly supplied with fresh Indian ink supplied by large and beautiful aquarium octopuses. These scribes drew in very artistic calligraphic gestures the latest happy events, the sad happenings, and all the distressing vicissitudes of life.

—What the humans don't need to know is the date and hour of their death, murmured Gabriel. Their excessive curiosity would make them unhappy and even miserable.

In spite of this, Réal apologetically grasped the thin and gnarled fingers of an ageless scribe, unrolled it feverishly, and discovered that the date of his death... had not been registered.

—I see that the Heavenly Administration is in no more hurry than that of Ottawa! commented the disappointed man in a low voice. Technically, I'm not dead yet... Should I be saddened by this?

The Archangel Gabriel watched with a gentle smile the scribe who, with an interrupted gesture, held his quill in suspense, as he observed Réal with great benevolence:

—Fully enjoy this final moment of life. This angel will no doubt record your death as soon as this brief moment is over.

A few moments later, they resumed their flight to the Muslim Paradise. Everywhere, like peacocks swelling with pride in a parade of beauty, strutted fascinating gardens, open or enclosed, like verdant oases surrounded by inhospitable deserts.

—Why do certain paradises still exist if they are no longer nourished by an earthly religion?

—I thought I'd explained it to you... Where do you want to put these

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people? Let them float in the delicate ether of the Beyond, like interstellar clouds, and be discarded like lepers? Nobody else want them...

—Why not?

—Because they haven't followed any of the religious guidelines of today's religions, so they are disdainfully left outside the paradisiacal doors as miscreants. See those shabby suburbs at the entrance of every Para dis?

—You mean outside?

—Yes! said the archangel.



●27●

Gay people of all Countries, Unite!

Réal had clearly noticed all those derelict populations that clustered around the threshold of each Garden of Eden of each religion, like dark slums, grim ghettos or dire shantytowns on the outskirts of today's industrial cities.

—*What's this?*

—*It's the poor atheists of all denominations, as well as former spouses of the Chosen who were not admitted to their Paradise, because they didn't have the opportunity to convert to their spouse's religion.*

—*That's so... surprising!*

—*Surprising! Surprising! You may not know this, Réal, but some religious groups do the same. They do not accept in their sacred cemeteries the spouses of another faith...*

—*Or without religion?*

—*Or without religion!*

—*This is absurd, I thought the cemetery was the only place on earth where humans could live serenely in perfect brotherhood.*

—*Well, think again! It isn't the case. And that's not all... We also find in front of their gates, men who have had an accident or a surgery, and who, for example, have lost their manhood...*

—*What's that supposed to mean?*

—*It means that—for example in the Hebrew faith—if a man has an accident—or presumably a surgery for trans gendering—and his sexual attributes are torn from him, he is excluded from his church*

by his co-religionists.

—Is this a joke? asked Réal.

—Not at all, as you can see it in Deuteronomy in verse 2 of chapter 23. It says: "A man whose testicles are crushed or whose rod is cut off shall not be admitted to the assembly of Yahweh." This is truly a case of excommunication.

—It saddens me greatly. So, why most of the world's religions have never ceased to condemn racism and discrimination in all their forms, and proclaim the benefits of universal tolerance!

—When they are themselves perfect models of intolerance.

—They are promoting this Virtue for external use, if I understand correctly! said Réal.

—I like your icy sense of humor. I think that as soon as you get out of Purgatory, we'll be able to use you in our Good Humor Office!

—Good Humor Office?

—Yes! Here in the Beyond, everything may seem sad and gloomy at first. So, we try to add a little touch of cheerfulness and gaiety.

—Except that gay people must not be welcome, based on what I've heard on earth.

—Absolutely not, Réal. I know that this is a rather general error in the great religions. But in truth, I tell you, all humans beings of good will have a place reserved in Paradise. You can't be condemned for a tendency that God has imposed on you without asking your opinion.

—You reassure me!

—Are you gay?

—No, not personally, but I have calculated that there are three hundred and fifty million gay people on earth.

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—*That many?*

—*That's only 4% of the world's population.*

—*A third of a billion! That's amazing! exclaimed the magnificent angel. It's equal to the population of the United States.*

—*"Gay of all countries, unite!"*

—*Oh no, please! You're falling into the unacceptable!*

—*You Réally have weird ideas with your angelic face. I mean, if all the gay men in the world could join hands, they could make quite a circle and have a hell of a run!*

—*Yes, but if they bought aircraft-carriers, they could make "gaiety" mandatory, as your neighbors to the south do with their plutocratic false democracy.*

—*I see that you are assiduously following the earthly news.*

—*Sometimes I do... You know that in ancient Greece, gaiety was almost compulsory.*

—*Almost?*

—*In those days, contempt for woman was so great that it was considered ridiculous to love a woman. True love could only be between men. The other love was derided to such an extent that boys would hide to love a girl, for fear of appearing grotesque and even somewhat perverse.*

—*How strange! It was Réally the opposite of today! It's as if humans needed to despise difference!*

—*That's right! It just goes to show that fashions are capricious and whimsical.*

●28●

The Behescht of the Persians

For a long time, they had been skirting the immense *Canyon of Despair*, at the bottom of which languished many *hells*, as numerous as they were varied in their forms and in their tortures and distresses. From far and wide, perilous and narrow footbridges bravely darted over the void to cross the bottomless abyss.

—*What's all these footbridges over the chasm we've been skirting for a while?*

—*These are the passageways that symbolize death: the passage from life to death. This is the Rchinevad footbridge which leads to the Behescht or Paradise of the Parsis.*

—*Parsis?*

—*It is the ancient population and religion of Persia¹⁵, before Islam obliterated it. The last Parsis took refuge in India. There are still a few hundred thousand. They are part of the Caste of Traders.*

—*So the Behescht lives on.*

—*Yes, in slow motion.*

—*And what does this Rchi bridge represents...*

—*Rchinevad. I told you; it is the passage between Life and Death. If you have sinned too much in your life, the bridge opens under your feet, and you fall into Hell.*

—*Oh my goodness! There! What a horrible misfortune... And that bridge over there?*

—*This is the Bamboo Bridge to lead that leads Chosen in*

¹⁵ •Today called Iran.

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Taiwanese Paradise. But this Paradise is now closed. There are no more adepts on earth. That's why this walkway bridge is falling into disrepair. You notice that its bridge deck is only miraculously holding up!

—I see that miracles contribute effectively to all beliefs.

—Almost all... The "Principle of Divine Retribution" is often the same: he who has led a dishonorable life is inevitably thrown away into Damnation.

—It's chilling!

—It's better than being too hot, because in most of the hells of Humanity, the penalty of fire is that of the wicked.

—How curious! They were inspired by each other?

—I don't know, said the angel. Fire is probably regarded as the pinnacle of torment. Flames purify, cleanse the impurities of the body and soul and destroy them. In addition, they punish the guilty through suffering. Lately, I stumbled upon two Salem witches who had once been burned alive in New England and had been admitted directly to Heaven...

—By bypassing Purgatory?

—Yes, by circumventing Purgatory, because God had established that the peccadilloes they had committed deserved no more.

—But then, they weren't Réally witches?

—Not at all. They had been falsely accused and had confessed under torture to everything that the judges had been willing to impute to them. Prosecutors made it a point of honor to prove their case, to help their careers, knowing full well that those sentenced to death were not guilty. Some of these Public Prosecutors had never lost a case, and they cheated like mad to be able to flatter themselves with this appearance of talent.

—*It's criminal!*

—*You can say that!* said Gabriel. *Vanitas vanitatum omnia vanitas! Hell is paved with prosecutors and judges who have killed more innocent people in their careers than the worst serial killers they've tried. But here, it's no longer a question of telling "caps"...*

—*Lies*, corrected Réal.

—*That's right. Hey! What allows you to correct me?*

—*Excuse me, my dear angel.*

—*Archangel.*

—*My dear Archangel Gabriel.*

Réal had irritated him with his mania for correcting what he took to be mistakes, but which was not always so. He loved to correct others so much. He tried to change the subject:

—*After all, all the great religions are alike, Gabriel!*

—*Not at all, Réal. Hinduism is very different from Christianity, Judaism and even Islam.*

—*Ah?*



●29●

The Amarnath Yatra Cave

—*Do you see yonder, on the horizon, continued Gabriel, stretching out a wing towards an extremely high Himalayan range, all those ants winding their way up steep, dangerous paths, through snow-fields?*

—*Yes! I can see them.*

—*Those insects are humans trying to please Shiva, the God of Destruction!"*

—*To save themselves from falling victim to him?*

—*Exactly! Every summer, like industrious ants, crowds of turbaned sadhu pilgrims climb the Kashmiri Himalayas along these steep, narrow and paths...*

—*Where are they going?"*

—*To the Amarnath Yatra cave. You see the first ones here. They are arriving in front of the huge cave that opens up onto the rocky cliff face.*

—*I can hear the tinkling of bells, and I smell the scent of incense.*

—*It's a tribute to Shiva. They come here to admire the sex of this God who stands hard and white, an ice stalagmite at the bottom of the sacred cave.*

—*Why, then, do these violent soldiers throw the pilgrims out of the cave with great blows of sticks, as we can see to the left?*

—*Because these poor people are exhausted after this terrible climb, and they would like to stay for a few minutes to pray in the holy grotto. But as soon as they have deposited their offerings, the*

security staff unceremoniously chases them off to make way for the next ones who follow, who will in turn be able to leave their donations that they have been saving penny by penny for years.

—But what is Shiva going to do with all this money?"

—His monks and servants, including the beaters, live off it, replied the angel.

—They are very wise and cunning... And that distant mountain over there, rising up horizon like a pale ghost?

—This is Mount Soumarou, the Paradise of Hindu Goddesses and Gods.

—Hindu Gods? You mean they have more than one?

—Well, my dear fellow, they first have a trinity (Brahmâ-Vishnu and Shiva)¹⁶, then several others (Ganesh, Hanuman, Rama and Krishna) to complete the picture.

—Ah!

—It is a bit like the hundreds of saints that Christians pray to?

—I understand... And so humans go on the Mont Soumarou, with the gods?

—No, Réal. It's much more complicated than that. The Hindus are a very old, very sophisticated civilization. For Hindus, Heaven and Hell are not the ultimate goals as they are with us. Both of these places are temporary... between reincarnations.

—Reincarnations?

—The ultimate goal, the supreme ideal, is not morality and love of neighbor, as with Christians, or submission to God as with Muslims, but freedom. Everyone tries to free themselves from material

¹⁶ • These three divinities represent, in the same order, the Creator, the Pre-saver and the Destroyer.

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slavery by renouncing all that is earthly through asceticism and yogi practices.

—I see. Isn't it just any more or less ambiguous kind of liberation that our misguided anarchists claim?

—Nothing to do with it! This is not absolute freedom, because total freedom leads to confusion. And this chaos leads to the tyranny of the stronger over the weaker, and to the abuse of power. Among Hindus, this is just the opposite. If he partially succeeds in freeing himself, the Hindu's atman, his spirit, will be reincarnated. In fact, for them, there is no such thing as a soul; every being is a spark¹⁷ of the Ultimate¹⁸.

—What do you mean by this?... According to them, the soul does not exist. Only the spirit exists?

—Yes... But, you know, despite my angel wings, my brain sometimes has trouble grasping certain theories.

—But why do they worship the spirit of their ancestors so much?

—That's another matter... It's not out of love but out of fear... So that their deceased ancestors don't come to take revenge for their indifference.

—Ah!

—Yes, each and every being is a part of the Whole.

—The Just will be reborn in the skin of a person of a higher caste. But if he doesn't free himself from the slavery of his five senses, he may also be reborn into a lower caste or even an animal.

—So, if I understand properly, you are born into a higher caste if you've behaved well on earth in a previous life.

¹⁷ •Or atman.

¹⁸ •Or brahman.

—Yes, so that you can take full responsibility for your own misery and social decline.

—It's a perfect religion for imposing capitalism!

—Why is that?

—Because poverty is not seen as a consequence of the exploitation of the world by the sharks of finance. No wonder social tensions are lower in India!

—That's for sure!

—In fact, just as Christianity helped the Aristocracy to exploit the people of Europe by declaring the Nobility of Divine Right, so the religions of India and this caste system help Greedy Capitalism to exploit the people of India.

—You're right, said the Angel.

—But you say that the Paradise of the Gods is at the top of Mount Soumarou. Where are the Heaven and Hell of humans? asked Réal.

—According to some Sages, on earth among humans. I told you that Hindu Paradise and Hell only last for the intervals between the successive deaths of humans and their reincarnation in another being in a new world.

—How curious!

—Hindus see the earth as a place of misery and sorrow, or pleasure. But this place is not permanent. The purpose of life is to behave well so as to deserve to get out as quickly as possible, and escape from the infernal cycle of birth and death. And Hell and Paradise only exist for us during the intervals between death and rebirth. Because the spirit does not immediately find a replacement body in which to be reborn. These are temporary states where our spark of life is rewarded or punished for a more or less long season.

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—*What about the Paradise on Mount Soumarou? asked Réal.*

—*Yes! I'm coming to it! Over there is the Radiant Kingdom¹⁹. Some other Sages, the Generous, believe that the Gods invite deserving humans there between each reincarnation. It is a Paradise of pleasure and luxury: soft music, fine food, sensual perfumes, sublime flowers and scents, verdant gardens. Beautiful asparas in the form of irresistible maidens strive to satisfy all the needs of the Gods and humans in temporary abode. They satisfy the most diverse passions, especially those of heroes who die on the battlefield.*

—*Again, the famous "Warrior's Rest"... What are the sins or transgressions that can defile a Hindu?*

—*For example, a person who is born of an illegitimate union result in an impure birth, which in turn leads to a reincarnation in a lower caste or even in a sacred cow...*

—*Waou! If we practiced this religion, half of our population would go and graze on the grass of the field! There would be seventeen million sacred cows in Canada!*

—*Well! Our unemployment rate would lose its boldness. Among Hindus, what is considered the purity of life must be absolutely respected and safeguarded. Everything must be taken into account: the purity of our birth, respect for the truth, knowledge of the Scriptures, dignity, forgiveness, energy... The animal must be respected because it may be a reincarnated parent...*

—*Everything matters! Réal adds.*

—*Everything: having incestuous intercourse, killing a Brahman, killing a cow, having a plagued wound with maggots... All this is impure. The cremation of the body purifies and liberates the spark*

¹⁹ •The Svar-Loka.

of life, i.e. the spirit, from its bodily envelope. This cremation will take place ten days after death for the Brahmins, the best caste, and thirty for the inferior.

—The Brahmins seem to be the purest Hindus?

—They are. A Brahmin, i.e. a religious, cannot accept food from a lower caste.

—It's not designed for fraternity or human equality!

—But, my dear fellow, who told you that humans are equal before God? They are equal before the law, but not in the eyes of the Most High. Have you understood the precepts of this religion?

—As a matter of fact, not too much!

—Well, it makes me happy, because I myself am an archangel and yet I have a hard time grasping the subtleties of it,... And I wouldn't want to feel inferior to a human being. When I became an archangel, I vaguely felt that I was touching the threshold of incompetence.

—I hear you! Basically, the ultimate goal of their personal efforts is to disappear completely from this land of misery and to reach the Void, as soon as possible?

—That's it... On the other hand, the Paradise you can see, down there, is the Buddhist Paradise, called the Garden of Purity.

—Purity?... So they don't have beautiful and irresistible nymphs "asparas" like the Hindus to reward the Chosen with more rewards... Concrete.

—In fact, for Siddhartha Gautama, the true and supreme Buddha, the one who created Buddhism, for him, therefore, Paradise does not exist, it is the Paradise of Nothingness, the Paradis du Néant!

—It's disappointing! How, then, can there be so many Buddhists? I thought the purpose of religions was to suppress death by creating

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hope for survival in the Afterlife?

—Life is so hellish in some parts of the world that Nothingness is preferable. But still, some people need a hope of survival. This is why the Buddha Amitabha, who came later, filled what he considered to be a gap by creating in his teaching this famous Garden of Purity. He's down there,... to the West... Far away. Can you see it, over there, near that vertiginous mountain?

—Yes, I've just received a flash of it, a dazzling reflection from the sun!

—Yes, that's it... In this Paradise there is nothing but happiness, no suffering, no storms, no perilous mountain passes, no danger to the Chosen Ones.

—Let's get a closer look.



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The Garden of Purity

Gabriel changed course to follow the sun's rays in the heart of the mountain range, and Réal was soon able, to his great satisfaction, to admire this Buddhist Paradise. A veritable mountain of "prayer wheels" cluttered the entrance. The God'Chosen had abandoned them there, after a life spent agitating them to glorify and implore their loving God.

Réal soon understood why the sun was more dazzling here. This Paradise was overflowing with sparkling gold, gleaming with pure silver, emerald and clear crystal. A long row of banana trees heavily laden with fruit and palms with refreshing shade, crowned it with verdant branches. These trees ran alongside a golden fence, no doubt designed to discourage free-riders who felt the irresistible temptation (quite legitimate though illicit) to sneak in and enjoy all the benefits promised to the Divine Chosen, without deserving them.

—*A golden fence like this*, murmured Réal, who kept his Quebecois pragmatism intact, must alone be worth a fortune!

—*In Paradise, we don't look at prices too closely*, replied the archangel. *We generously offer unlimited resources to those who have agreed to lead an exemplary life on earth, without rebelling against the established order.*

—*But... Dear Archangel. Earlier, on the subject of Louis Riel, you told me verbatim that "those who do not defend their rights are guilty of encouraging tyrants to dictatorship."*

—*Yes?*

—*So, we need to know whether or not you advocate respecting the*

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established order with all its abuses.

—It all depends on the basic rules of your teaching. Jesus never advocated submission to tyranny. And I personally agree.

—Well! You reassure me!

The Buddhist Paradise took my breath away with its beauty. The trees, decorated with vermeil and gold tiny bells, tinkled like oriental wind bells, in the peaceful calm of the beneficent shades. Everywhere you looked rivers and ponds lined with rare species of trees, and beaches with saffron-colored sand. Lotus leaves caressed the shimmering water of the ponds with their fresh greenery. The music accompanied with its charming vibrations the light tinkling of bells and the wonderful song of the birds of paradise; a sublime choir. In the pure grass, vases and pottery by the thousands, finely adorned in shimmering colors, overflowed with precious stones or bewitching perfumes. Multitudes of men in orange togas lived happy days in this fascinating bliss.

—It is a miracle of beauty, said Réal, deeply charmed by these places of delight and fulfilment. All these monks and lamas are undoubtedly the same ones who, on earth, begged for their bowl of rice, along the poor, stinking and overcrowded streets?

—Not at all, my friend! Only a few of these earthly lamas have been awarded Eternal Happiness. Most of those you have seen on earth were just idle people who took advantage of the work of others to live a modest but indolent life.

—You mean: common parasites?

—You can say that! Only a few of these earthly lamas led a life of prayer and asceticism. Those ones were admitted without difficulty to these blessed places. Most of the other Chosen of this Paradise are the innocent dupes of these unjustifiable quests. All these faithful deprived themselves of food in order to give generously to those

lazy Pharisees.

—In any case, continued Réal, I'm happy to see that God has managed to separate the wheat from the chaff, and grant the generous the enjoyment of his Paradise, because, I repeat, these places are a miracle of beauty, even if all these heaps of gold have no market value here since they cannot be spent.

—I'm glad you like it, Réal. I guess you must regret not behaving a little more wisely in your life. This Paradise is a compensation for the human multitude of the destitute. They have accepted their fate without revolt and have submitted peacefully to the fate of their misfortune without jealousy, without contesting the wealth of the rich and the order established by them, said the Archangel Gabriel, lowering his voice as if he wished it to remain secret.

—Gabriel, why do you speak so low that I have trouble understanding you? Réal said aloud in order to provoke him. Are you afraid that the Most High will hear you?

—Are you insane, Réal? What are you going to imagine?



●31●

The Egyptian Palace of the Two-Truths

Farther in the direction of the Near East, a garden completely enclosed by walls appeared to them.

—*The paradise I see yonder; What's that?*

—*This is the Paradise of the ancient Egyptians.*

—*You mean, the one of the mummies, Ramses and Tutankhamun?*

—*Yes! Do you like Egyptian civilization?*

—*I loved it at school. But I didn't think I'd ever fly over their World from Beyond the Grave.*

—*Would you like us to make a detour to visit it?*

—*I would enjoy it!*

They passed over a magnificent palace of red, green, blue, and black porphyry. It was almost the colours of Gambia and Namibia. The archangel referred to this exceptional building under the ambiguous name of *the Palace of the Two-Truths*. They entered it through a large window, which yawned under the blazing sun. Humans were still being judged there. The God Osiris played his crucial role as *Judge of the Dead*.

—*How can there be **two** truths, dear Gabriel? Isn't the truth unique? Only error can seem multiple?* Réal murmured, smiling.

—*I knew you were going to ask me that, you, sardonic human who finds pleasure in bringing his fellow men in difficulty in order to put them down... This expression simply alludes to reality as perceived by humans, in the face of the absolute Truth, that of God.*

—Oh... Could you explain all that, dear Archangel?

—No doubt, this is another trick question?

—No, not at all! Could you explain to me why this paradise, which was supposed to be closed for thousands of years, is still functioning?

—You're annoying. You remind me of a pretentious man who lived on a tiny islet in the Indian Ocean. He always took perverse pleasure in humiliating his fellow men by showing them their ignorance. Thus, he could despise them at his leisure. He feels taller by lowering others. And this impious man admired only those memoirs superior to his own.

—Uh...

— Was memory his only reason of esteem?

—*Errare humanum est.*

—If you start talking to me French again...

—It's Latin, Réal; Latin! But I won't make fun of you... Osiris is also regarded as the God of Fertility, for he was once murdered and managed to live again, just as every day is a kind of resurrection, every life and every year too.

Réal noted in his heart that, by his feigned anger the archangel had very cleverly evaded his question, which remained unanswered, for he dared not ask it again. He observed the curious scene before his delighted eyes. The *Judgment of the Dead* was taking place at that very moment in the Palace of the Two-Truths. Osiris was enthroned at one end with all the other Egyptian Gods, who were quietly sitting like docile and respectful pupils on smaller thrones lined up on either side of the Palace of the Two-Truths. Réal counted 42 judges in all. A dead man holding a large scroll of papyrus under his arm appeared before them. To Réal's great

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surprise, the dead man launched into a lengthy *negative confession*, consulting his papyrus very often: "*I did not kill, ... I did not steal...*" When he had finished, a large *Scales of Justice* was unveiled, and the heart of the deceased was torn out by a servant and placed on one of the two trays, while a *Feather of Truth* was positioned on the other. A kind of fabulous animal watched the operations with great interest, like a dog observing a delicious marrow bone.

—*Who is this frightful monster, part hippopotamus, part lion, part crocodile?* asked Réal of the archangel.

—*She is the goddess Ammut. The Dead Man holds under his arm a Book of the Dead, a papyrus scroll that serves as his magical guide to avoid the pitfalls in the Afterlife.*

—*A sort of Michelin Guide, what ... Say! The God Ammut does not indulge in seduction!*

—*I know. Seduction is not her job... She'd be more of an undertaker. She prepares to devour the embalmed body if the scales tip the wrong way. And so, the deceased will die a second time. His heart is considered to be this human soul.*

The heart of one of the Egyptians swept away the unstable balance of the Scales of Justice. Osiris frowned, and Ammut, who had been carefully scrutinizing the face of the God-Judge, threw himself on the tray and voraciously swallowed the heart, in the twinkling of an eye, with the same greed as a mastiff gulps down the contents of its bowl. The dead man thus lost all chance of rebirth in the Afterlife. Then the gluttonous Goddess engulfed the well-embalmed body of the entire man in the squeaking of the skeleton, crushed between her powerful jaws. "Eternity" of the unfortunate human being, had been reduced to nothing in the twinkling of an eye, despite the beautiful appearance of his body, an essential condition for his eternal survival. The heart of the next body was declared balanced. Osiris announced in a dull, level voice:

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*—You're in balance, human. Your băă, your soul, will be rewarded.
You may continue your journey to Heaven to join Ră our great Sun-God.*



The Seven Paradises of Islam

Our two heroes, archangel and policeman, travelling companions, resumed their flight to the East where the God Ră (the Sun) was rising.

—*And that bridge over there, what's it called?* Réal asked, after pushing the horizon a few thousand miles away from the Palace of Two Truths.

—*You're never satisfied, insatiable for mystical knowledge, Réal! This footbridge is our destination. This is the Sirath's Bridge. It leads to the Paradise of the Muslims, which Muhammad rightly called the Garden of Delights.*

—*Interesting! Do you think they're going to let us cross it?*

—*As far as I'm concerned, that's for sure. For I am also an angel to the Mohammedans... but as for you, I don't know.*

—*You mean I'm in danger of falling into their Hells?*

—*Their Hells are called the Jahannam.*

—*Well! Well! Well!* replied Réal, aware that the archangel had willingly refrained from answering his question.

A shiver of terror ran down the man's spine, as he gazed in horror at the giant gorge (as vast as the Grand Canyon), the floor of which was cluttered with many Hells of the various religions that control a large proportion of the human race. On the other side of the giant chasm, at the other end of the Sirath's Bridge, the Archangel told Réal that he was contemplating the First Heaven of Muhammad's *Garden of Delights*.

—*The First Heaven? How many do they have?*

—*Seven, stepped and tiered like the Gardens of Babylon, more and more refined as we get further away from the bridge.*

—*Well! This is probably where the expression "in seventh heaven" comes from; to indicate an extraordinary place.*

—*Probably.*

—*But why do they have all these Heavens? Wasn't one enough?*

—*No, because humans are more or less deserving or sinful. Like Christians, Muslims also have a Purgatory which they call Al-A'RAF, to purge men and women of their defilements in order to admit them at least to the level of the First Heaven. After which, God places them in the appropriate Paradise they have earned on earth. Those who are worthy of the best Paradise without passing through Purgatory are placed directly on the right level.*

Gabriel was talking, talking... He was as talkative as a magpie, but Réal didn't complain about it because he was hungry for knowledge himself. When they reached the entrance to Sirath's Bridge (a narrow footbridge with no balusters), the screams and shrieks of the Damned from Muslim Hell (the Wretched of the Jahannam) reached them. It was as impressive as Christians' Hell. The man leaned forward, overcome by a sickly curiosity mixed with fear. Suddenly, Gabriel let out a loud cry that nearly toppled him into the Great Inferno of the Damned.

—*Azraël! Azraël!*

Then a magnificent black angel appeared. In a few strokes of his wings, that snapped in the hot air like the strokes of a guard's whip, he landed at the entrance to Sirath's Bridge. The two angels exchanged a few polite greetings:

—*Hail Gabriel, great Archangel of the Ecumenical God, how are*

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you?

—*Salamaleicoum Azraël, beautiful Archangel of Death. I'm doing great!*

—*How, old brother, can we not feel privileged when we see all those human beings suffering from a hopeless evil, damnation?*

Réal was surprised that they greeted each other in several languages. Azraël held out his hand to shake it. He then struck his chest, as the Mohammedans usually do to indicate the seat of their feelings of hospitality and welcome. As he shook hands with the handsome Azraël, Réal realised, to his immense surprise, that he was not immaterial like the angels and the Christian Chosen Ones. He pointed this out to the Black Angel, who confirmed this detail.

—*Thy impression is good, O mortal creature! Here, in the Jahan-nam of Islam, and, indeed, throughout Muhammad's Garden of Delights, humans become incarnate again. They return to a body of average age so that they can better appreciate the pleasures that God has reserved for them as a reward for their life devoted to the teachings of the Holy Word of the Qur'an.*

—*Is that's right?*

—*Yes!... Or else to suffer more intensely the sufferings they have earned and which, as a result, are mercilessly inflicted on them?*

Gabriel added simply, searching for words.

—*Thank you for your precious help.*



●33●

Azraël's opinion on Quebecers

Réal was very impressed by the beauty of the two archangels, one as white as a Quebec Christmas, and the other as black as a starry night. He realised how privileged he was to be able to admire these two beings placed at the top of the celestial hierarchy, immediately below God. These two divine creatures could admire the Almighty on a daily basis, and it impressed Réal greatly *to see eyes that had seen God*. With a great effort, he finally pulled himself out of his reverie, as if quicksand were clinging to his feet.

—To return to the Seven Heavens, which allow Muslims to be rewarded according to their merit, why seven and not six or eight?

—Seven is a biblic... I mean Coranic and sacred number. That number simply means "many", Azraël replied with great simplicity and kindness, giving a few strokes of his long wings to ventilate Réal, for he had noticed that the intense heat of Hell was causing crystalline beads of sweat to spring from his bare forehead and bleached temples.

—If it's the number 7 that's bothering you, the Kaffirs in Africa have 27 Heavenly levels; the Yucatan Maya are happy with three. This way, all their deaths can be at the precise level of their merit.

—It's sweltering, scorching hot around here. It's like being in the middle of the Sahara or the Gobi Desert when the sun is at its zenith.

—And you haven't seen anything yet... Gabriel continued. This gentleman is from Quebec...

—Québécois? Azraël exclaimed. He is therefore one of those people eager for independence and freedom, who seek to break free

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from all chains, including the precepts that God has striven to inculcate in them, in the past.

—You said it, Azraël," Gabriel added in despair. Everything seems to them to be an obstacle to their holy freedom. They are a people who sell their churches at public auction, a people who are very difficult to govern, but who have a very generous heart.

Réal was flabbergasted to hear the Archangel Gabriel making generalizations about his countrymen. He had always been told that generalizations about an entire people should be avoided, even when they were positive, because they led to and justified prejudice and ostracism.

—I agree with you, Gabriel, they are a bit like the Hindus who are trying to free themselves from everything!

—Yes, but not from the same chains, Azraël continued.

—Before long, you're going to have to create a Québec section in your Paradise...

—Oh my goodness! With the curses and swearwords, they utter as coordinating conjunction²⁰. I can already hear the endless litanies of Quebecers in damnation. All those magic word would ring in our Most High's ears..

—You think so?

—Absolutely, and they would be quite capable of asking for their independence. No, on the contrary, they must be "durhamized" as soon as possible.

—Durham-what?

—...assimilated to make them dull and pale, non-politicized beings,

²⁰ •The 7 coordinating conjunctions in the English language are: **for, and, nor, but, or, yet, so**. Mnemonic: FANBOYS.

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who accept everything without hesitation!

—Like your compatriots from other provinces?

—Yes, like them



●34●

In Search of Aïcha

—Regarding Muhammad's Seven Paradises, Réal interrupted to change the topic of conversation, *I still find it a bit difficult. It doesn't make it easy for me because I'm looking for a woman named Aïcha.*

—Aïcha?

—Yes.

—Well. It's a Sunni first name. So, you'll have to search in this section.

—How do you know that?

—Because, historically, Aïcha was the third wife of the Prophet Muhammad. She was his favorite wife, and when Muhammad died, a terrible civil war broke out between Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law who had married Fatima, one of the Prophet's daughters, and Aïcha. After a bloody final battle and massacres, the Sunni clan of Aïcha won victory over the Shiites of Ali.

—So, it was an inter-family war for control of power disguised as a religious war between his daughter Fatima's clan and his third wife Aïcha's clan. Family jealousies, and personal ambitions! Gabriel commented.

—Is it from that time that this terrible vendetta has existed? asked Réal.

—Yes, Réal! In polygamous families, the power struggles are very violent. Each mother prepares her boys to seize power as soon as the common father breathes his last. The quickest one immediately murders all the sons of the other wives, even before they learn of

the death of their common father. In Muhammad's family, this family war led to a clan war and then to international wars. And millions of Muslims have died, innocent victims of this incessant vindictive vendettas, of this law of retaliation that will never end... never²¹! This makes the Prophet sad. This is why many of those responsible for these killings are thrown into Jahannam as soon as they die.

—I see. As in our country at the time of the religious wars between Catholics and Protestants... Catherine de Medici must have been damned.

—That's exactly what it is, Gabriel confirmed. She has been;... like King Charles II of England, who by his Test Act made English Catholics subhuman,... or the pastor Ian Paisley, who throughout his life stirred up hatred, even if late in life, frightened by his imminent death and his long list of crimes to be expiated, he wanted to make peace with the pope. And I beg you to believe that most of these hatemongers, both Catholic and Protestant, are roasting in Hell. I saw Catherine several times. She is there for infinite Eternity.

—But... it's a pleonasm, Gabriel.

—What do you mean?

—Nothing, nothing, my dear Gabriel! ... I mean hatemongers deserve to burn in hell, Réal said cautiously. But the Jews,... Didn't they have those kinds of family divisions?

—No, not the Jews, Gabriel cut in. They had enough trouble with Christians and Muslims. It left them little room to destroy each other.

—I would advise you to refresh your memory, my dear Gabriel, said Azraël, a little stung to the quick. I remember very well the so-

²¹ •In many countries (Albania, Scotland, Corsica...) vendettas still claim many victims.

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called War of the Jews, in principle against the Romans, which Flavius Josephus described very well. Long before the coming of the Christians, the Jews did not disdain to kill each other in fruitless civil wars. I am sure that if they had not been so persecuted by others, they too would have torn each other apart for a thousand futile reasons...

—Let's not try to prosecute intentions, Réal imprudently interrupted, seeming worried that the quarrel between the two archangels would escalate to the point that he could no longer continue his police investigation.

—In any case, concluded Azraël, who wanted to have the last word, the adjective "anti-Semites" is probably a misnomer, for we Arabs are also sons of Shem, and therefore Semites.

—Perhaps, great and beautiful Angel of the Night, we could get back to a less sensitive subject which touches me deeply: I need to talk about Aïcha, who was the victim of a horrible crime?

—If you're looking for Aïcha, I have a few questions for you. What kind of life did she lead in Joliette?

—Why do you want to know this?

—To try to guess in which of the Seven Heavens, she could have been assigned.

—Or the A'Raf²², Gabriel suggested.

—That's right!

—As far as I know, she led a very edifying and virtuous life, Réal said. Insofar as my tragically interrupted investigation could have taught me to know her, she was not known to have any faults, any extramarital affair of any kind.

²² •Purgatory.

—Yes, but did she respect the Five Pillars of Islam?

—What are they?

—Shabada, salat, saun, zakat and hajj!

—That's Hebrew to me! Could you enumerate them for me in English? asked Réal.

—That's Hebrew, That's Hebrew... Be careful with your expressions, whispered the ebony angel. Hebrew is not yet the official language of Janna, and it'll never be.

—Excuse me. But these Five Pillars?

—The first one is the Profession of Faith: "GOD IS GOD AND MUHAMMAD IS HIS PROPHET!" The second pillar is prayers and ablutions five times a day. The third pillar is fasting once a year in Ramadan time, the fourth is giving alms at least once a day, and the last is a once-in-a-lifetime pilgrimage to Mecca.

—I didn't know Aïcha well enough to evaluate her in all her deepest depths. But she was really a good girl," said Réal.

—Well, well! Azraël said impatiently. But let's not forget that a good girl in Quebec has nothing to do with a good girl in Islamic Faith. I'd even say that...

—Look in the middle of Paradise, said the archangel Gabriel.



The Jahannam

Azraël flew away for a few minutes, disappeared, and then came back with special permission to take a Christian into *the Garden of Delights*. When we know that Christians and Jews are not allowed to go to Mecca for fear that their impious feet might defile and even profane the sacred ground which the prophet trod, we can easily imagine that this was a very exceptional and short-lived permission.

—Let's get started right away. We're going to visit the Third Heaven.

They began to cross the famous Sirath Bridge, which dangerously spanned the Muslim Hell. Gabriel held Réal's left hand tightly and Azraël his right. Our daring Québécois, courageously struggling against his fear, strove to tread on tiptoe along the narrow gangway which forced the two archangels to fly on either side of the walkway over the horrible Gehenna.

It was a vast, flame conflagration area. At bird's eye view – sorry, at archangel's eye view! – the immense crowd of the Damned could be seen and heard screaming like tortured victims. Scorching and pestilential winds blew violently. Boiling water gushed out in geysers and deadly whirlpools that mingled in the darkness with a thick sulfurous fume. And since all these Damned human beings had bodies, they were racked by hunger and thirst. Azraël continued:

—To quench their hunger and thirst, all they have is the horrible,

bitter fruit of the Zacoum tree²³, which fills their bellies. The poor Damned must climb up this thorny tree and suffer martyrdom in order to gather their yellowish fruits no bigger than mirabels. These fruits are so bitter that they wring from the faces, distorted by misfortune, a surge of facial convulsions. You can verify this detail by observing all these outcasts. They are thirsty and can only quench their thirst "with boiling water and pus discharge, which they swallow with the greed of thirsty camels."

—*My goodness, what a horror!* Réal exclaimed.

—*Do you see, yonder, the strange being who stirs and screams with great enjoyment in the midst of the Damned?*

—*Yes. Who is it?*

—*This is Iblis, our Satan. He is a fallen angel who, out of pride, refused to bow down to God... like your Lucifer.*

A few years earlier, and quite by chance, Réal had read the minute description of Allah's Gehenna by the Arab writers Yahia ben Salem and Muhammad ben Abdallah. He could see that they had revealed only the plain truth. Bright red flames streaked like lightning bolts across this world of despair. Thanks to the steady hand of Azraël and Gabriel, Réal was able to move slowly along this narrow and fragile bridge without balusters, much more rickety than Capilano Bridge in Vancouver.

—*Who are these beings of flame with eyes of sparkling embers who are just tormenting the poor Damned?* Réal asked in horror, pointing his chin down, for he didn't dare let go of his archangels' hands.

—*They are jinns... evil beings.*

²³ •The spiny tree of Zacoum, in Latin *Balanites aegyptica*, grows in desertic regions.

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—*They seem to be made of embers?*

—*I never touched them for fear of burning myself, said the ebony Archangel, but our Great Muhammad described them in verse 15 of Surah 55. He said: "The jinns are made of the flame of a smokeless fire."*

Everywhere, thousands of demons and jinns were busy with jubilation and frenzy in the midst of the Damned. With a revival of voluptuousness, the jinns plunged back into boiling water and the worst suffering those of the miserable Damns who had the nerve to extricate themselves from it, in order to spare themselves the torments of their exemplary punishment. Mesmerized by this satanic view, the Québécois continued to walk, trembling like a tight-rope walker on his cable, along the narrow, railingsless Sirath's Bridge, which dangerously spanned the Islamic Hell of Jahannam. In the distance, Réal could see three new Pavilions, three more trials to overcome. These three modest pavilions were scattered along the Sirath Bridge. Three long red flames, sharp as the blades of a sword, struck those three pavilions in succession. Réal crossed the first pavilion without tipping over into the void, because he had never blasphemed on the name of Allah or on that of the holy Prophet Muhammad. The second pavilion was also passed through because Réal had never done the slightest harm to any human beings. But on the third, which could not be crossed by those who had neglected the daily ablutions and fasts of Ramadan, the Bridge of Sirat suddenly opened like a gaping drawbridge, and it required the strong grip of the two archangels and the force of sustentation of their great wings —assisted, it is true, by the burning air, more buoyant than the cold— to keep the pot-bellied policeman above this misery of suffering and wailings. Seeing himself thus hanged above this vertiginous void, Réal thought he was going to die of apoplexy.

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Finally, the Garden of Delights

—*Réal, look how beautiful it is over there!* Archangel Gabriel exclaimed, stretching out his chin to the other side of the deep abyss. He felt that the Québécois was on the verge of fainting, and he wanted to take his eyes and mind away from such an abominable Hell, and even, let us not mince words, *apocalyptic inferno*. The Joliettan policeman could then take in at a glance all the Seven Paradises of Islam that rose in tiers high into the sky. These seven Paradises resembled the prestigious Hanging Gardens of Babylon, one of the Seven Wonders of antiquity. They overflowed in cornices over each other and, seen from his angle, gave a bit of the impression of overlapping.

—*It looks like a gigantic fountain, a cascade of greenery that rushes down the tiers from Heaven to Earth, containing a wide variety of trees, shrubs, and vines, cried Réal enthusiastically. Each tier reminds me a bit of the Gardens of the Alhambra in Granada or the Alcazar in Seville, in Spain.*

He had the chance to visit the Iberian Peninsula during an organized trip by air-conditioned bus.

—*These wonderful gardens of Babylon are but a pale picture of our Paradise, my dear Réal, protested Azraël, puffing himself with pride.*

Reaching the other side of the infernal abyss, the trio passed through a monumental door and Réal was able to fill his lungs with delicately perfumed air; it was the First Heaven of Islam, whose walls were of fine silver.

In the center, stood proudly the *Palace of the Majesty*,

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entirely built of white pearls. Everywhere, grew opulent trees, as wide as parasols, at the bottom of cool valleys watered by fountains of freshness. Here and there, slumbered animal, camels, donkeys, dromedaries; all had distinguished themselves in the service of the prophet or the men of God.

—*Wow! It's surprising to see that animals have also inherited Paradise!* Réal exclaimed with amazed eyes.

—*Why not, Azraël replied. You see, over there, it's Barak²⁴, the winged donkey who carried our prophet Muhammad to Heaven during his famous Night Journey. From Mecca, he led him to Jerusalem in the twinkling of an eye, and then to Paradise. Aren't they God's creatures, too, young man?*

Barak's robe was more dazzlingly white, than freshly fallen snow. The donkey wore all over his body, embroideries studded with diamonds and precious gems that glittered like myriads of stars.

—*You're right, beautiful black Archangel Azraël... Thank you for calling me "young man".*

—*Don't thank me, Réal. You're only a few decades old and I'm thousands. And besides, don't rejoice too much about it. The word "Man" arouses in our mind an extremely pejorative connotation...*

—*Really... like in feminist minds?*

—*How could this not be the case, when we see the calamities, they are guilty of on earth? Demons no longer even have to suggest evil to men; they take the initiative themselves at every turn... Animals, on the other hand, are God's creatures, and they too are entitled to eternal reward.*

²⁴ •Barak, Boracq or Buraq, according to the Arabic transcription. A U.S. president was given this name by his Muslim father.

—*I have no doubt about it. I adore animals myself. I also have a house cat.*

—*Ah! But if you "adore" animals, that's very bad! I advise you to choose your words here. God is jealous of being the only object of worship on behalf of His creatures. Remember that we adore only God!*

—*Sorry, Archangel! It's the inflation of words.*

—*The inflation of words? What do you mean?*

—*The meaning of words wears away like pebbles under the waves of habit. For example, the word astonishment used to mean "to be struck by lightning"... Well, you see what I mean.*

The journey of the Joliettain continued through the *Second Heaven*, elegantly dominated by the great *Palace of Peace* all in red sapphire. Then the *Third* followed, called the *Garden of Refuge* in yellow chrysolite with beautiful green reflections that burst from the walls like flames of greenery.

—*Chrysolite?* He asked the archangel, who described these treasures to him with remarkable kindness. *What is it?*

—*A very precious stone, my friend. Very precious. Nothing is too good for our Elected Ones.*

A fleeting thought crossed Réal's critical mind about the elected representatives of our democratic country, for whom nothing was too good either. They, too, live in royal palaces at the expense of taxpayers. But he kept his comparison very much captive in the depths of his mind, knowing the Mohammedans to be very susceptible. Perhaps they would not like their *Chosen* or *Elected* to be basely compared to local politicians.

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So much gold, silver, so many precious stones!

God had truly wished to give ample benefit to His Righteous Ones, who had striven to follow all His holy wishes to the letter. He had given them everything they had lacked in their parched lands during their earthly life. From one Paradise to another, the sumptuousness of the landscapes was enriched by greenery and living waters. The fourth Paradise was called *the Garden of Eternity* in yellow coral, and the fifth *the Garden of Beatitude*, dazzling in its silvery whiteness.

—*The sixth is "the Garden of Firdaus"²⁵, of red gold, and the seventh that you see over there, the famous "Garden of Eden" of white pearls, murmured the Archangel.*

—*I visited the Hôtel Riad Bab Firdaus in Marrakech which has borrowed this sacred name, said Réal, but it can, in no way, compete with the celestial original.*

The Chosen Ones were draped in long tunics of bright green silk, the sacred color of Islam, symbolic of the lush vegetation of Paradise. Everywhere, gold, silver, pearls, and precious stones sparkled in dazzling flashes, like lively eyes seeking to attract to their beauty alone the admiring gaze of the Chosen Ones. Ruby paving stones, emerald columns, woodwork with the most distinctive species, rare and most precious, everything shone and seemed dreamlike.

—*It's so beautiful!* said Réal.

—*Thus, you'll be able to say that you've seen the Garden of*

²⁵ •Riad Bab Firdaus means Garden Firdaus. Riad = Garden, Bab = Door.

Delights, watered by rivers of delicious milk and streams of heady wine.

—He! Heady wine? There must be occasional inebriation.

—No, my friend! Although heady, this wine does not cause any harmful intoxication that gives rise to disputes. Our Paradise is designed to satisfy every good and desirable desire.

—How can wine be heady if it doesn't bring it to your head? Gabriel insisted.

In the face of the horrors of Hell, which tried to dissuade humans from being lured to evil, the magnificence of Paradise became an irresistible attraction to the Good. What we wouldn't do to immerse ourselves in such ineffable happiness?

—Azraël?

—Yes?

—Why is it that in the Mohammedan Paradise, everyone moves and lives, while the Christian Paradise is so static?

—Static? "What do you mean?" Gabriel replied, to give himself to think of an acceptable answer.

—All the Chosen are motionless,... in ecstasy...

—It's a mystery, Réal. It is true that among Christians, the reward is to give glory to God and to show Him how much we'll worship and admire Him for all eternity. It is the human being who gives to God, his Creator. Whereas among Muslims, it is God who gives to men,... who rewards them for what they have done on earth... The goal is not the glory of the Creator but the happiness of the creature...



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The Holy Houries

—Over there, Gabriel, take a good look at those girls. Who are all these young girls with big black eyes and skin as white as camel's milk who accompany men, even the ugliest, the most deformed, the most timid? Are they maids?

—They are Houries, Réal, graceful and magnificent virgins. They are not servants. The servants of the Chosen people are all those shy young boys with long eyelashes, who bring golden cups full of delicate fruits.

—But then, who are these... Houries?

—They are angels who are there to serve as companions for men, for eternity. They are always young and beautiful, attractive and smiling.

—In flesh and blood, I suppose?

—They are indeed angels, but God has willed them to be flesh and blood to contribute to the pleasure of men... of those righteous men who have done what they can on earth for the glory of Allah, the God of the Universe, and also to the triumph of Muhammad his dear prophet.

—We're going to take a little rest under El Mentaha's tree, Arch-angel Gabriel suggested

It was a colossal tree, ten times taller than the giant, hundred-year-old firs of our Canadian Rocky Mountains. Beneath its solemn foliage, which cast a beneficent shadow over the verdant grass, stretched a long, very long table, carved from a single giant diamond as big as a massive rock.

It glittered so brightly with all its fire, so much so that it had to be bathed in shadow under the foliage of this giant tree, so that its brilliance might not hurt the eyes of the Chosen Ones.

All around this buffet-display, men and their beautiful dark-eyed Houries were choosing new and delicious delicacies, fruits unknown on earth, sorbets more refreshing than the Siberian blizzards. All these delectations overflowed in great golden dishes encrusted with fiery diamonds, gilt bowls, and pastel-colored horns of plenty²⁶. The young and shy servants, with eyes veiled by long black lashes, filled the crystal goblets with fine wine, and above all,... above all, with the voluptuous water of Selsibil.

—*Here, taste the water of Selsibil*, said the ebony Archangel, handing Réal a chiseled cup. *You'll tell me all about it*²⁷.

Réal drank in small sips and felt his heart fill with joy. Happiness penetrated him and dwelt in him for a long time.

—*It's getting late*, said the archangel, *and your day has been a trying one. Maybe you want to take a little rest in this dream pavilion. It's a big carved pearl, hollowed out by an army of artists.*

Réal looked at the pavilion in wonder:

—*Could I have a Hourie to keep me company in this palace?*

—*I can see that the water of Selsibil is already having some effect on you... Unfortunately, that's out of question*, cut off the Archangel Azraël, gently. *Houries are strictly reserved for pious Muslims who have achieved great things on earth, for heroes who have sacrificed themselves for their God.*

²⁶ •Cornucopias.

²⁷ •According to Mokatel, the Selsibil and the Kauther are rivers whose course developed underground. [Journal Asiatique ou Recueil de Mémoires d'Extraits et de notices relatives à l'histoire, à la philosophie, aux langues et à la littérature des peuples orientaux; written by a group of writers, and published by the Société Asiatique, 3^e série, Imprimerie Royale, Paris, 1837.]

—But why does the same God require Christians to turn the other cheek, and command Muslims to fight and kill?

—You must have misread the Bible, my dear fellow, Azraël continued, smiling mysteriously. You should read the Deuteronomie, verse 2 of chapter 13, God commands you: "If a prophet invites you to follow other gods, that prophet must die. Yes, you will kill him, and your hand will be the first that must put him to death; then the hand of all the people will continue the execution. You shall stone him to death, for he has sought to lead you astray from the LORD your God." This directive has nothing to do with the desire to turn the other cheek, does it, Réal?

Gabriel whispered in Réal's ear for a few moments, as he ran out of arguments.

—This is true, and I'm very surprised by it, as you can see," replied Réal, smiling. But the fact remains that killing a single man has nothing to do with killing an entire population, as in Surah 37 of the Qur'an where Verse 4 reads: "When you meet the infidels, kill them until you have made a great slaughter of them, and bind the captives you have taken."

—Ask and you shall receive, dear Réal. Ignorance unjustly leads you into the worst contempt for other religions. We always think we're superior when we have gaps in knowledge. And I'm not surprised that my friend Gabriel, who loves Christianity as much as Islam with equal faith, whispers to you some boomerang arguments that will allow me to correct your faulty judgment... Read the Book of Joshua. He orders, in the name of God, to slaughter entire cities. Do you think God is happy to be presented as a mass murderer by this aggressive liar? Take a look at Deuteronomy, Chapter 11, which states: "Yabweh will dispossess all nations for your benefit... Every place that the soles of your feet tread shall be yours; from the desert, from the Lebanon, from the river Euphrates, to the western sea, your land will extend. No one will stand in front of you..." Also look at Deuteronomy

chapter 20th, which commands: "As for the cities of these peoples, which Yabweh your God has given you as an inheritance, you shall not let them be alive. Yes, thou shalt dedicate them to anatema²⁸, these Hittites, these Amorites, these Canaanites, these Perizzites, these Hivvites, these Jebusites, as Yabweh your God has commanded thee." Don't you think, dear Réal, that the intolerance advocated by these lines is the equivalent of that of Surah 37?

—Let's talk about something else, Réal suggested.

—Thank you, Azraël... So, you're saying that I have to do without... Hourie? Is it definitive?

—Yes, I'm sorry for you. It's no longer time to change your religion when you're dead. On earth, you should have chosen the one that would bring you the greatest pleasure. It's a pity for you, my poor boy.

Réal was beginning to doze off when a loud voice drew him out of his first dream:

تلك هي الجنة التي وعدتم بها جزاء أعمالكم.

tilk hi aljanat alati waeadtum biha jaza' 'aemalikim.

(This is the paradise promised to you as a reward for your deeds)



²⁸ •Destruction by *Holy War*, similar to Islamic *Jihad*.

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Finally, we find Aïcha Bouriane

In desperation, Réal tried to sleep alone, but the miraculous Water of Selsibil had filled him so much with excitement that he couldn't sleep. Suddenly a loud voice roused him again from his waking reverie:

« هذه هي الجنة التي وعدت إلى الصالحين »

"This is the Paradise that was promised to the righteous!"

He understood that it was the voice of the Most High, stood up and hailed the two archangels seated under the majestic tree of El-Mentaha. They arrived quickly.

—I'm sorry to disturb you, my dear Archangels, but I'd like to find Aïcha as soon as possible to ask her some precise and relevant questions. In this wonderful place, I tend to forget my duties as a private investigator. In this way, I will be able to leave this Paradise, which is tempting but mainly inaccessible to me, because I'm not a Muslim.

—I inquired during your nap, Réal, said the Archangel Azraël. Aïcha Bouriane doesn't seem to be here at this level. She should stay in Sixth Heaven. So she was, as you said, a very good person.

—I knew it. My investigation had convinced me of this.

The two archangels seized Réal by the saddles and crossed the Fourth and Fifth Heavens with great speed. It was surprising to see their large wings brush against each other, and even criss-cross, without getting in each other's way, without hindering and thwarting each other.

The exceptional beauty of the Seven Gardens of Delights grew and grew as they climbed the terraces. The most delirious landscapes, all of greenery, gave these regions the appearance of peaceful Japanese gardens with enchanting rivers. The beauty of these ensembles rivaled the flowers themselves. The air was filled with unfamiliar perfumes, and the water was as radiant and refreshing as silver leaf, when it wasn't milk, pure and immaculate as ivory, or honey, golden and clear. Here and there, among the pavilions of fine hollowed-out pearls, the Elect Ones, dressed in green silk, were walking on the arms of beautiful dreamy Houries. Réal was fascinated by their appearance.

—Those beautiful virgins with their big black eyes, and their flesh as soft and fresh as the white grapes, with long anthracite hair, are there for the happiness of the Chosen men, the ebony Archangel insisted thoughtfully as he saw Réal glance at them.

—Obviously, such beauties must not remain virgins forever, murmured Réal, smiling with lust.

—You're wrong, Réal. You're really used to talking before thinking.

—That's what my wife used to tell me,... How, then, is this possible?

—Our Almighty Creator immediately gives them back their virginity!

—Wow!... But... Correct me if I'm mistaken, beautiful Archangel of ebony; this seal of safety was placed by the Most High in this obligatory passage to guarantee women's virginity to men? Wasn't it?

—That's right.

—How could it be a guarantee if it snaps back into place, after each use, or if it lets intruders through without tearing itself apart, like a good-natured husband?

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—You're talking of complacent hymens... Here in Paradise, my dear Réal, Houries are incapable of deceiving the Chosen men of God. So, it's not for a purpose of mistrust or guarantee. God is Great and Merciful, and He has provided this surprising pleasure for the sole delight of pious men alone.

—Personally, I have never found a Joliette girl who has been able to offer me such satisfaction... or such a rapture, as you say. But there must be some. Deep down, I wonder if I'd enjoy deflowering chicks. It's rather painful, isn't it?

—How could I know? Don't forget that I'm an angel, and as such totally asexual.

—Why didn't I convert before I died? murmured Réal. I could have enjoyed forever these sublime benefits... almost unknown on Quebec soil!

—In this blessed place, God offers you everything they lacked on earth... Azraël said proudly.

—What else, for example?

—Our zealous followers have had the courage to live in the arid desert of Gobi, in the barren vastness of the Sahara, in the desolate solitudes of Arabia and elsewhere... So, in Heaven, God offered them opulent vegetation...

—It's true. I'm a witness!

—Don't interrupt me all the time...

—I'm sorry!

—They lived with sparse water. God has given them many rivers, abundant honey, the Water of Selsibil, wine and milk, lakes and waterfalls sparkling like Champagne nectar. Their food was scarce. God distributed to them succulent delicacies in abundance. The Most High had asked them to avoid alcohol, which distorts

judgment and sows degradation, but in Heaven He serves them heady wines –including the water of Selsibil– which give them inebriation without perverting their spirit. They were poor and destitute; God gives them opulence, gigantic gems, pearls, gold and silver. Their lives were fleeting –all the more, brief because they were willing to die for their faith. The Almighty offered them eternal life. They receive Eternity as an inheritance in exchange for a few years of sacrifice and privation. Isn't that a rewarding and profitable bargain, very hard to turn down?

—I readily agree.

In the Sixth Heaven, a shy servant pointed out to them a giant pearl which served as Aïcha Bouriane's pavilion. Réal entered after knocking gently the doorframe, flanked by two servants with long black eyelashes. Aïcha slept soundly on a bunkbed of precious wood carved by a brilliant cabinetmaker. Silk sheets, embroidered with fine gold and silver, sparkled with a brilliance that did not hurt the eyes of the Chosen One. Another servant with long black eyelashes was swinging before her calm face, a multi-colored fan of peacock feathers, whose refreshing breath seemed to awaken the Blessed One:

—Who is it? What do you want?

—Hello Aïcha Bouriane!

—Hi!

—Let me introduce myself: I'm Réal Vadeboncœur from Joliette.

—Joliette? You are from Joliette!

—Yes!

—Hello, I'm delighted to meet you! A great pleasure, indeed!

—I was the investigator in charge of clarifying the causes and responsibilities in the case of your murder... in Joliette.

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—Oh!

—Yes. I was investigating...

—But why do you speak in the past tense?

—Because I'm dead,... Me too.

—Ah! I should have known... in a place like this! I am surprised to see a policeman from the *Sûreté du Québec* to come and investigate all the way to Paradise. They have a good reputation, but at this point... It's really pushing excellence beyond its natural limits.

—Into the *Beyond Boundaries*, that's for sure... We are remarkable investigators, but... to be honest, I'm not from the *S.Q.*

—Really!

—I was investigating the crime that put an end to your life, and following which I myself was the victim of a homicide that seems to me to be a premeditated murder.

—Ah! You mean, an assassination... I'm so sorry for you.

—Thank you... I appreciate your compassion and sensitivity. I, too, am sorry you've lost your life...

—It's mutual, believe me... Don't worry too much. These are things that happen in the mortal world... at least once!

—Do you know many who live and die several times?

—Yes, Hindus.

—It's bad enough to die just once; I am happy to be a Muslim.

—I didn't even know you were a Muslim.

—Confidentially, I didn't know you were one yourself.

—I'm not. As you can see, I am not dressed in the green silk tunic of the local *Chosen Ones*!

—That's right! I had the feeling that something didn't fit with the reality of these holy places without knowing what it was... But then, how did you get admitted into the Garden of Delights?

—Momentarily... just to ask you a few questions necessary to solve my investigation. I had to ask the Archangels Azraël and Gabriel to lead me here. Since Gabriel is accredited by both of our religions, it's easier. He has free admissions everywhere!

—As for me, I arrived some time ago, but I'd been sent to the Seventh Heaven following a minor administrative error... by some absent-minded scribe. They are quite excusable... at their more than venerable age... centuries and even millennia... In the end, I was demoted to the Sixth.

—Poor you!

—No way! On the contrary, I am delighted about it. If you only could see the unimaginable luxury that is on display in the Seventh Heaven. It's absolutely staggering. Everything shimmers with diamonds, everything glistens with fine gold. Just think, the Prophet resides there with his thousands of Houries, with breasts as round as pomegranates. He lives in a palatial complex of a thousand pearl palaces, gigantic hollowed-out and sculpted pearls, even more imposing than mine, which is already quite considerable in size.

—I'd love to see that... But... Does the Prophet live alone in this Seventh and ultimate Paradise?

—No! He shares these holy places with the most deserving Chosen Ones of Islam: ascetics, a host of scholars, scientists, learned men of the Middle Ages who gave all its pride to the Islam of the Golden Age, the ulema of the mosque of Al-Azhar, famous religious and literate center of Islam, hundreds of Algerian muftis, murdered by FLN fanatics for declaring, in their mosque and in spite of threats, that killing Christians was a sin, a few peaceful imams, a

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few nonviolent ayatollahs, and more and more martyrs arriving in crowds.

—Martyrs? You mean those who have given their lives for one of the many Islamic causes and who, it is said, have the privilege of having at their disposal seventy-two Houries with big black eyes to satisfy their every biological and emotional need?

—I do not know what you are referring to. The martyrs I am talking about are all the innocent victims of religious violence. All of them... with no exception... On the other hand, all those among the spiritual leaders who say: "If you do whatever I want, you'll go to Paradise!" are condemned to damnation, selfishly monopolizing the Word and Authority of Allah and the Holy Prophet to impose their own will. Believe me, they are not allowed in the Garden of Delights. Muhammad advised us to respect our fellow men. Have you crossed the Sirath Bridge?

—Yes, of course.

—Well! The second pavilion could only be crossed if the human had never done the slightest harm to his fellow man.

—That's right, I'm a witness about it!

—Yes, you can how important it is for us to respect our neighbors!"

—I wanted to ask you... the Houries... do they do all domestic service for the Chosen ones?

—No, not at all. To serve us, we have a host of servants, effeminate shy boys with long eyelashes. They're very helpful and precious to everyone, said Archangel Gabriel.

—You know, added Aïcha Bouriane, lowering her voice so as not to be heard by Azraël. Effeminate boys aren't exactly popular in our faith. On earth, they're sentenced to die and stoned to death, and if, by some kind of miracle, they're admitted to Paradise, they

have to take on humiliating roles that make them inferior to the Houries themselves.

—Lucky to have domestic help! said Réal. But what do you enjoy as a woman? Do you have the same privileges as men? Can these servants with long eyelashes be your companions?

—Of course not! They can't be interested by women. I count myself lucky! I have them as servants... And I can eat as much as I want. Succulent dishes unknown on earth, with sweet and exquisite flavors.

—Royal couscous from Morocco?

—Absolutely! Even more. Royal couscous is almost banal... even if it's delicious and worthy of the King of Morocco, Guardian of the Faith, and of the greatest princes and dignitaries of the Cherifian Empire.

—It's not really fair for us, Christians, not to have similar privileges in Paradise!

—You should have thought of that before. It's not the time, now! You know what I mean, Réal, it's not all benefits. For a start, I've put on weight. Everything is so delicious... irresistible. And then, as far as Houries are concerned, it's very rewarding for men, but I'm not really interested... What is it like in the Christian Paradise?

—From what I've noticed, at first, it's extraordinary. You fall into ecstasy as you contemplate God and savors the canticles of the various angelic choirs. It's wonderful... It's as exciting as André Rieu's big orchestras used to be. But I've been told that after a few centuries you become quite jaded. Enthusiasm sinks like a soufflé cooled by habituation. It seems that among the older generations, some become powerless to reach ecstasy...

—It's a well-known phenomenon!

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—...Even the famous Psalms of David, sung over and over again by seraphim with their voices as sweet as orange blossom honey, can no longer give us the necessary concentration and, above all, the needed resilience.

—It reminds me, said Réal, of a sentence I read as a child in a morality book, back in the days when this virtue was taught in public schools. It read as follows: "The abuse of pleasures dulls our ability to appreciate them."

—How true that is... Uh... I wanted to ask you before I forget: could you describe the circumstances of your murder?

—Of course, but, having passed away yourself, I don't see how you could possibly return down to earth to solve this crime and bring the investigation to a conclusion.

—You're quite right. I'm continuing my investigation simply out of personal curiosity, for my own intellectual satisfaction.

—It is quite extraordinary to be interrogated in Paradise by a police officer from Joliette.

—In any case, I agree that's something out of the ordinary. But you're right; I will find myself in Christian Purgatory for a long time, and, as a result, there's no question of unmasking your murderer in order to have him brought before a Court.

—Aren't you a Chosen One yet?

—No!

—In any case, as far as I am concerned, your visit is a distraction I greatly appreciate.

—How nice of you! Are you saying that you're getting a little bored here?

—No, not really. But it's certain that men are better off than us women. Just like on earth. I am totally indifferent to Houries, and

the servants are very charming and do their work with passion, but they are not fit by nature to serve as our companions. It seems that we, women, are still forced to remain virtuous, sexless.

—It's a pity!

—A pity, without a doubt! But you know, I was excised as a child, and because of that, this side of Love leaves me pretty indifferent!

—Yes! I understand! Habit and routine must be the Chosen Ones' worst enemies in any religious denominations, without a doubt. We get tired of happiness and forget about it, faster than we get weary of suffering. That's normal. To truly appreciate happiness, we would have to be able to confront it with discontent and compare the contrast. To combat this habituation, the ideal would be a brief stay of the Chosen Ones in Hell. They would be so happy to return to Heaven after allowing themselves to be tormented for a few moments by the infernal flames.

—That would undoubtedly be radical. There could also be inter-faith exchanges. We should twin the Christian and Muslim Paradises, for example. The Chosen could thus taste and enjoy a new kind of happiness that would last for a few years. The number of Paradises being limitless, and as varied in their conception as the human imagination can fantasize them, the Chosen could always enjoy their happiness without falling victim to habituation and monotony.

—I'm pretty sure that the Mohamedian Paradise would be so attractive to men that the other Heavens would become forever feminized. It's an insoluble problem.

—But to come back to your murder, Aïcha Bouriane, I'd like to know what you yourself noticed before you died.

—Not much... So, on that fateful Tuesday, at noon, I was at the traffic lights in the Rue Saint-Charles-Borromée. The pedestrian

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lights were red, so I was standing, patiently waiting... Suddenly, an old-model green Buick sprang up, bit the sidewalk and hit me... And I was thrown several meters away.

—How did you know? You must have been unconscious?

—Yes, I was killed instantly, said Aïcha, because at the same time the passenger of the Buick fired at me. Immediately after my death, my soul rose in suspension above the scene of the accident, and I saw, next to the driver, Rodolphe Lapointe, a rather large, dirty blond man with thick eyebrows, who was retracting his handgun after shooting me.

—Do you know the assassin, Aïcha? asked Réal.

—Of course! He's a friend of my husband's... from Montreal. I even had him over for dinner. I had prepared a royal couscous for him.

—In this case, it changes everything. What's his name?

—I told you: Rodolphe Lapointe.

—Ah! I thought it was the chauffeur's name.

—I didn't know the driver.

—Perhaps we could try to paint a sketch of it. Do you have a pencil and eraser?

—Here, said a servant, bringing in a notebook and drawing materials.

—Thank you, sir!

—I am honored to be at your blessed service, replied the long eyelashes servant.

Réal made a facial expression that meant:

—Wow! It's not in Quebec that servants are so submissive! They

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are more interested in striking than in submission! Please, where were you from before you died?

—Algeria! I was killed by homophobic thugs.

—Poor you!

Then Réal drew the portrait of the assassin Rodolphe Lapointe according to Aïcha's description.

—No... a little thinner... There you go... Like this... the eyes bigger and more bulging... on the edge... Yes... sunken cheeks...

—You have an exceptional visual memory,... almost infallible.

—It has certainly improved since I have been living here. But either way, it's a striking sight, believe me! Being hit in the face by a Buick and at the same time a pistol bullet in the chest is enough to leave an indelible memory, as you put it.



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The Departure

Time passed, and the impatient Archangels, who from time to time suggested the way back, eventually got their way. It was time to say goodbye to Aïcha. Réal wanted to kiss her on the cheeks or on the lips as we do in Quebec, but she gently pushed him away.

—*No! It's better to just shake hands.*

—*Don't tell me there's gossip here, too?*

—*Not really, but it's hard to break long-standing habits.*

After a tender farewell, Réal left the Muslim Paradise with some regret and took leave of dear Azraël, so sympathetic. The two Archangels embraced each other effusively, and our two friends took off in different directions. Réal clutched at a few of Gabriel's feathers to keep up, because his archangel's hands were full of gifts from the ebony archangel.

The return to the Christian Paradise went off quite satisfactorily without a hitch. As on the outward journey, they flew over a number of different paradises, very different from the others in their conception because the archangel did not take the same route. Some totally closed, others open for the same good reason: some human beings still lived the precepts put forward by these religions.

—*It's strange, all these Paradises,* said Réal to the Archangel, who was rowing with effort, encumbered as he was of packages.

—*It seems strange to you because you're just an ignorant man, but it makes sense to me. All our religions have the same goal, to neutralize fear, and even the dread, should I say, created by Death.*

From time immemorial, human beings have been terrified of death and the Afterlife. And all those poor people who knew they were going to die, just wanted to be reassured.

—But I'm not afraid of death, Gabriel!

—You're already dead, you wacko! How could you be afraid of it, when you already know what's on the other side? It's the unknown that frightens.

—Yes. That's true... But even when I was alive, I wasn't afraid of it!

—Because you were still young. Some are afraid of it at a very young age, others as they get older. When the inescapable hour approaches, death comes a scarecrow, a real haunting of which they sometimes have only a slight awareness. They no longer make long-term plans because death seems so near and final. Sometimes they don't want to admit it, but the fear is always there, underneath, barely hidden like a kitten under a quilt. They know that it will eventually get them, but they still hope to escape it for a few more seconds.

—Is it for all these reasons that soldiers, young and brave, aren't really afraid of death.

—That's right! They think they're invulnerable. Death cannot touch them. Their courage is built on recklessness. Then, one day, they see their companions fall and fear grips them, even if they refuse to admit it to themselves. They're, finally, afraid of death, and that's when courage becomes true bravery, for they must overcome this fear, which is more formidable than the enemy itself.

—And they become cowards?

—Sometimes yes! So, the government, which launched this war under pressure from the economic lobbies, whips up their courage into shape by extolling the virtues of patriotism. They called them

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heros. They are awarded medals of valor. And when that's not enough, they're threatened with prison, infamy or death. It's the blood tax!

—It's disgusting!

—You said it, my friend...

Réal was flattered to hear Archangel Gabriel once again with such a complimentary "*my friend.*"

—This is where Heaven intervenes, he continued. Paradise is then promised to those who are willing to offer their only life to the Fatherland, in other words to war profiteers...



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We fly over the famous Vahalla

—*You see, just below us, at the other end of the Bifröst Rainbow Bridge, this strongly walled Paradise, covered with battle shields as shingles?*

—*Yes, I can see that! The roof resembles a large turtle shell... And I hear metallic clanking.*

—*It is the Chosen Ones who fight with swords and maces. This is the Palace of the Vahalla, Paradise of the Germanic Tribes. As you can see, it's huge, with its 540 bronze gates, from which every morning 800 warriors emerge, eager to fight; four hundred against four hundred... Battling is their eternal reward.*

—*Oh! It reminds me of my nephew Jean-Marc who spends his every spare time for as long as I can remember, fighting die-hard enemies on an online site.*

—*Oh my Goodness!!*

—*And what did these Germanic and Norwegian tribes call the God of the Universe?*

—*Odin, the King of the Gods. To serve this religion, God built himself a Residence in Asgard, at the center of the world. This is a Paradise for men only, *Paradis bare för menn.**

—*Why is that?*

—*Because in the Vahalla, the only Chosen Ones are fighters killed in battle... therefore men. The only women who are allowed are the Valkyries. They pick up the dead from the battlefields and transport them to the Paradise. Odin welcomes them into his Heavens, and the Valkyries are always ready to satisfy the warriors' every desire.*

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—*In all areas?*

—*In all areas!*

—*Well, well! Like the Mahometan Houries and the Asparas nymphs of the Hindus. What's it like inside this palace?*

—*The great Valhalla Palace is a vast completely original construction. The rafters supporting the roof are made of spears and javelins. The ceiling is covered with battle-shields and the seats upholstered with ribbed mail.*

—*It must be very uncomfortable!*

—*They don't complain about it... In the evening, the surviving knights retreat behind these 540 great bronze gates where the beautiful valkyries serve them the boar meat that has been simmering all day in giant hammered copper cauldrons. The girls also fill their mugs with mead²⁹. They call it Odin's Banquets.*

—*Thus, these humans love war so much that they spend their Eternity fighting.*

—*Yes, they combat from morning to night, and even ambush each other at night, probably under the effect of mead. They get killed, resurrected, and fight again.*

—*Some of the most combative and fierce Germans died millions of times and still continue to fight endlessly. This is their reward.*

—*Strange... A thousand times strange!*

—*That would be a punishment for me! When will they understand that war is absurd?*

—*That way they were sure to be able to continue practice their favorite sports: drinking, eating, waging war, and rubbing shoulders with the beautiful valkyries, who, without hesitation, jumped*

²⁹ •Mead or hydromel: fermented, alcoholic beverage made from water and honey.

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at the feet of the great wolves that served as their mounts, to extricate themselves from the armor covering their nakedness, to grant some pleasure to the heroic warriors. All these fighters would have been very wrong to try saving their lives when they were on earth. So, they were killed without any regret, without any bitterness or fear. That's courage!



The Tlalocan Garden

—*Here's a curiosity that will interest you, my friend,"* said the archangel, pointing to a particularly rich Garden of Eden.

—*What is it?* said Réal.

—*The Paradise of the Chosen People,... of the Jews... And the special square, in this corner, is reserved for the Tsadiquims...*

—*? ? ?*

—*The Tzaddikim are all martyrs of the Holocaust during the World War II. Whatever their individual morality may have been during their past lives, they have all been declared holy and have thus received Eternal Life and the whole and complete Plenitude*³⁰.

—*It is very curious to grant holiness to a mass of six million beings. Isn't holiness an individual virtue?*

—*Sainthood is a personal matter, of course, but martyrs can be beatified and canonized collectively! These people have suffered the martyre. An exceptional situation calls for an exceptional response.*

—*And on the horizon, to the West... What is this vast peninsula?*

—*It's the Avalon Peninsula, which borders Newfoundland. This is the Celtic Paradise.*

—*I thought it was in Cornwall...*

—*Avalon is the Kingdom of Avalloc.*

³⁰ ●Plenitude = Full and complete Fullness.

—*Is that what they call God?*

—*Yes it is! As you can see, in this Sky of Avalon reigns a perpetual summer, with fruits and flowers at will, to the elegant and harmonious sound of graceful harps. Sadness is totally absent from this Paradise,... when you're on the side of the Chosen Ones, of course... What more could you ask for?*

—*Probably nothing. But the climate has changed a great deal on the Avalon Peninsula, from what I know of the climate in Newfoundland.*

—*It's undoubtedly an effect of global warming.*

—*But this walled garden, far to the south... Who owns it?*

—*The Aztecs, my dear, the Aztecs... This is the Paradise of the Aztec People.*

—*From Mexico?*

—*Yes, from Mexico... This is the Tlolocan Garden where, here too, summer is permanent, and abundance eternal. The souls of the Aztecs live there in perpetual leisure and rich abundance. They can even return to earth in the form of butterflies to visit their families.*

—*Now I understand why, earlier, I spotted a few colorful butterflies wandering around the Milky Way.*

—*I don't doubt it, replied Archangel Gabriel.*

—*I have noticed that in all the Paradises of the Beyond, unlike in this world, there's no such thing as hard work or even smallest work. To do the work, they have servants, all these effeminate and shy men with long eyebrows. The Elect Chosen Ones are always idle.*

—*In all civilizations, replied the archangel, smiling, work has always been regarded as a divine punishment imposed on the lower classes. You Christians work only as a punishment for original sin.*

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—If Adam hadn't sinned, would we be living off hunting, fishing, and gathering?

—You'd have to think so... And yet it's said that "work sets you free".

—I'd rather not talk about this cynical slogan. But, yes, Canadians are clamoring for work today, because it's no longer inevitable.

—What do the Aztecs call God? asked Réal.

—Tlaloc, God of Rain, and therefore of Fertility. As a result, their Paradise is called the Tlalocan Garden. It's always associated with the abundance of water, and, therefore, food.

—Everyone knows that all the earth's water comes from Heaven.

—You can say that!... For the Aztecs, the way they die determines for them whether they would go to Heaven or Hell, rather than whether they had behaved morally or immorally during their lifetime. In order to enter Paradise, therefore, they had to be "lucky" enough to die a violent death by the forces of Nature sent by Tlaloc...

—What kind of natural forces?

—For example, by lightning, drowning, a storm...

—I see. This would mean that they take a lot of risks when the weather deteriorated.

—In Aztec universe, it was believed that the vital energy of the Sun-God, called "tonalli", battled against the Darkness to drive it out. The Aztecs, who wanted to help the Sun fight against the invading Darkness, therefore sacrificed thousands of prisoners so that their vital energy, freed from the bodies of those sacrificed, could reinforce that of the Sun-God.

—Strange! So, if I understand correctly, the Aztecs, like the Egyptians, considered their God to be the sun?

—Yes. And they all built tall pyramids.

—Perhaps they shared a common origin?

—Well, maybe... Some people think so... For the first four years after their deaths, Aztec warriors lived in another paradise called the Sun's Den. Their task was to help the Sun³¹ in its course... by giving it energy. At dawn, the dead Aztec warriors would gather on the eastern plain to welcome the rising sun and encourage it by banging on their battle shields. Then they accompanied the Star of the Day in its course to the zenith, that is to say, until noon. After that, they returned east of the Tlalocan to wait for the next day's sun. To follow in the footsteps of the Sun God, women took over, but only those who had died in childbirth. It was their privilege that led women to wish many maternities despite the great danger of death. All these privileged women accompanied the Sun God until evening.

—Was this circuit repeated every day?

—Every day. And after four years, the women who died in childbirth became graceful hummingbirds or beautiful butterflies that came back to earth to feed.

—It's very poetic for them. But why was the best fate reserved for women who died in childbirth?

—Because they produced warriors, and the Aztec rulers were in dire need of soldiers to expand their empire. Everything was calculated.

—They should have followed the example of some imperialist and belligerent countries that mainly used foreign mercenaries in order to spare their own citizens.

—It certainly would have been smarter. The Anglo-Saxon nations

³¹•Called the Ichan Tonatiuh Ilhujcan Paradise.

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to which you are referring to are very wise. But for their part, despite the Aztecs showed great commercial value, they would never have given up their place in battle to reap only the laurels.

—Surely!... They were not cowards!

—Humans who did not have the privilege of dying in the violence of Nature or during childbirth, simply went to Hell and were no longer allowed to see the Sun God. They were cast into the Darkness of Mictlan, as their Hell was called, and thus lost all chance of seeing the Light. They had to walk for four years, over very dangerous mountain roads, and brave a giant monster that had legs...

—Like a lizard?

—Sort of. Yes! And if they managed to get through, they still had to swim across an angry river.

—Quite a program!



●43●

The virgins of the Great Well of Chichen Itza

Further on, at the archangel's gesture, Réal saw on earth a huge crocodile covered in virgin forest floating in a liquid ocean.

—*What is this fabulous animal?* Réal asked Gabriel.

—*This is the Mayan world of Yucatan.*

—*The Mayans live on the back of a caiman. It must be quite uncomfortable.*

—*It must be. But that explains the earthquakes they sometimes experience and the violent tornadoes when Chac Mumul Aïn gets angry.*

—*Is that his name?*

—*Yes! It stands for Muddy Great Crocodile.*

—*I see. But the thirteen superimposed layers I can see on top of this crocodile?*

—*These are their thirteen Paradises. Each has its own God. But Itzamná dominates them all.*

—*Itzamná?*

—*Yes, the great two-headed serpent covered in quetzal³² feathers. It symbolizes the founding energy of the universe.*

—*I was told that they invented a writing, as well as the zero, like the Arabs, but that they practiced human sacrifice. Is this true?*

—*That's perfectly true! The invisible Mayan Gods were naturally*

³² ● Quetzal bird = *Pharomachrus mocinno*.

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nourished by invisible delicacies such as the scent of flowers, the smell of incense, the flavor of food, and the human energy found in the heart and blood.

—Like the Aztecs?

—Absolutely... The Mayans were vassals of the Aztecs.... To supply the Maya Gods with vital energy, girls and boys were sacrificed after drugging them to put them in direct contact with the Gods.

—They were drugged?

—Yes. Hallucinogenic mushrooms were reserved for priests, noble warriors who alone had the privilege of making contact with the Afterlife, and the sacrificed.

—The common people were not worthy of it?

—They were not! Their only role on earth was to work to feed the other two social classes, and to die at war.

—I've heard that somewhere...

—In Europe?

—Yes... all over Europe. And I suppose the sacrifices came from the people?

—How did you guess? the archangel asked.

—I have some historic intuition!

—The girls had to be beautiful and virgins...

—Of course.

—These virgins were carefully drugged before being thrown into the great well of Chichen Itza. But before that, the warrior who carried them in his arms had the... privilege to levy...

—To take what?"

—*To sample... How can I say?...*

—*Its virtue? Réal suggested.*

—*That's right... How did you guess?*

—*Your embarrassment seemed significant to me,... And then I told you that I have a lot of intuition. I also know that the ruling classes are very practical-minded and generally arrogate to themselves all these "droit de cuissage"³³.*

—*It is probably for this reason that they run the system. They know how to seize what doesn't belong to them.*

—*And then the great two-headed snake wouldn't have cared about this virtue offered as a sacrifice.*

—*Offered?... Evil tongues say 'stolen,' Gabriel murmured.*

Réal looked at the angel with an eye full of curiosity and astonishment.

—*Why are you looking at me with these eyes?*

—*I only have those... But I'm surprised at your open-mindedness, Gabriel. I do not despair of making you a true and thoroughly politicized Quebecker.*

—*You flatter me, but I wouldn't give up my job for a castle as famous as the Château Frontenac.*

—*I am sure you wouldn't. The Château Frontenac can't compete with paradise...*



³³ ● Called "jus primae noctis" or "Right to the Lordship".

Réal's Ancestors

On the way back, the Christian Paradise seemed very dull to our dead hero. The Archangel explained that this disappointing impression was due to the fact that he, Réal, could not see God, having not yet been assigned to the purifying Purgatory, which would allow him to access Paradise, and above all to see God, the ultimate reward of Christians. The real compensatory favor here was ecstasy in the face of the Most High. Réal thought with a touch of nostalgia of the brunettes Houries, the blonde Valkyries and the beautiful Asparas with their deliciously slanted eyes and gracefully unbridled bodies.

To kill the time that didn't exist in the Beyond, Réal sought out his own ancestors, for it occurred to him that they might be happy to befriend him. If one wished to persevere for an entire Eternity in these sweet, but no doubt fatally monotonous places, without sinking into neurasthenia, it would be best to build up a few solid friendships. It was during this quest for family friendships, this search for his own filiation and roots, that he, quite fortuitously, stumbled upon a group of aristocrats. They had the common trait of having been guillotined during the French Revolution and their fleshy bodies still lay under the luxurious tombs of the Picpus cemetery in Paris, in the shadow of the tomb of the Marquis de Lafayette. Réal asked them why they were apart, and understood from their very embarrassed explanations that they hadn't quite managed to free themselves from their caste mentality that still made them regard the rest of the Chosen Ones with a touch of contempt. But perhaps they just wanted to keep their illusions alive. One of them, more verbose and less cautious, insisted on telling him how he had courageously emigrated from France to join

the English army that was attempting to invade France in order to restore Louis XVI to his shaky throne.

—*How can you boast of having fought against your own country, Monsieur le Duc?"*

—*Because the Republic wanted to control religion. Isn't that reason enough?*

—*Nobility has always hypocritically hidden behind religion. You cannot deny that it was the Republic that abolished slavery in 1794, the first in the world. All the holy monarchies of Europe, by divine right, have accommodated this infamy!*

The aristocrat didn't know what to say. To change the conversation and lighten the atmosphere, one of them recounted a memory. During his own execution, when his head fell into the basket, he heard and understood, for another six long minutes, all that was said around him. This is how he heard his beloved wife, who had been so fond of him up to that time, say: "*At last, he's gone with the wind, that idiot! Honey, we're finally going to be able to spin perfect love!*" This comment had disappointed him. It's understandable. Especially since his wife's boyfriend was none other than the judge, the very one who had sentenced the husband to the guillotine.

—*But do you know, my dear friend, that King David himself also condemned to death an officer whose wife he coveted?* said a second aristocrat.

—*Power intoxicates the best people with a violence equal to that of alcohol or narcotics,* concluded a third.

Réal finally found his parents and grandparents down to the third generation, with the exception of a great-great-grandfather who, for some act of piracy, had been condemned to a long purgatory and had not yet completed his purification by fire. Everyone

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was delighted to make his acquaintance, and they spent the evening recounting their most astonishing memories.



Back to the good old city of Joliette

Finally, at the end of this highly enriching meeting, Réal decided to take a trip to Joliette and to his bedroom where his body lay. At the same time, this would give him the opportunity to check the earth's time on his bedside alarm clock, since he couldn't estimate how much time had actually elapsed since his death.

He soon found himself in his bedroom. To his surprise, his body was still hopelessly under the white sheet studded with embroidered flowers. His mouth was agape, his eyes closed, and his nose as clogged as ever. Really, Marie-France could have blown his nose.

The calendar clock read 7:01 p.m. on June 28. It had only been one day and seven hours since he had been transferred from the hospital. Bizarre. He felt as if he had already lived ten long years in the Beyond.

Suddenly, Réal saw the eyelids of his own body quiver imperceptibly. "*Here! Here!*" he thought. Soon his lips trembled, then they became animated and her mouth opened a little more. By what strange phenomenon could this be so?

Then he heard a long, loud whistle:

"Pppssshhhiiittt!" and he felt strangely and literally sucked into the fontanel of his own body, abandoned on the bed like a worn-out garment. He snorted and opened his eyes with a furious headache.

—*Oh, what an awful migraine. I absolutely have to find a pain-killer,* he thought.

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He managed to seat down on the edge of the bed, put on his slippers and dressing gown, and staggered to his feet. He opened his bedroom door and began to stumble down the stairs. He overheard a conversation coming from the living room. He crossed the middle landing and, halfway up the bottom flight, caught sight of the living-room. Well! Well! Well! Marie France was deep in conversation with the rest of the children Jean-Philippe, Christine and Paulette. The two girls were squeezed into the large leather armchair and Jean-Philippe into the one facing the television. Marie-France was sitting on the large sofa in her usual place. Oddly enough, there were even Justin and Linda, children from a first marriage. They had a families of their own. No surprise there. Gérald Prudhomme was still sitting next to Marie-France, but, to the great surprise of the ghost, he wasn't holding her hand.

Réal remained motionless at mid-stair, observing the scene he'd already seen. The conversation was lively. Suddenly, Paulette uttered a cry:

—*Daddy got up!*

The whole family went up the staircase and surrounded Réal.

—*Wow! You slept for more than 24 hours straight after leaving hospital.*

—*I thought you'd never wake up,* said Gérald Prudhomme.

Réal looked at him expressionlessly.

—*That was a close one, Réal. Five centimeters further to the left and you were dead.*

"*You would have liked that, wouldn't you? To take my place here!*" thought Réal, glancing an icy stare. But everybody believed that it was only the dullness of sleep that gave Réal that sour and unsympathetic look.

Everyone said a kind word, something to show their affection for Réal. But he now knew what would happen if the bullet's trajectory chose to take a shortcut through the heart or liver.

He vividly remembered his family's criticism when he had dreamt of his death. He was taken downstairs. Someone brought him his rocking chair. Before sitting down, Réal thought of Desiree, dead centuries ago, who had been killing her mortal—or rather celestial—boredom watching the Vadeboncœur family. She used to let herself be lulled to sleep on that wooden armchair.

—*Sorry Desiree!* he said as he sat down. Everyone looked at him in amazement.

—*You think I'm losing my mind?* he said. *Maybe I'm. I come from so far.*

Everyone agreed. He had a few bedsores, on his back and buttocks. He blew his nose noisily and spent the evening walking to refresh his body, weakened by too long an immobility. Alone at home in the afternoon, he said a kind word to each of the ghosts he could no longer see, but knew to be there in his living room, invisible witnesses. He could imagine them smiling sympathetically towards this human, back on earth, in this valley of tears, as the Hindus would say.



●46●

The Revealing Welcome

Two days later, Réal went to see his client Nasser, who gave him a lukewarm reception.

"Oh, I understand. He thought I was dead and consequently he would never have to pay the cost of my investigation. But he was wrong."

For fear of appearing extravagant and perhaps even a little insane, Réal didn't reveal to Nasser that he knew that his wife's hitman was Rodolphe Lapointe, a friend of their family. Clearly, like the moon, Nasser had a hidden side that he kept well veiled. This Rodolphe Lapointe was a petty bandit from an immigrant district, whose population was mainly involved in drug trafficking. The trick was to establish and prove the connection of Lapointe, the killer-for-hire, with his sponsor, Nasser himself. These hired killers don't respect anyone; even their friends are no match for a sufficient amount of money.

On a visit to Montreal, Réal went to Rodolphe Lapointe's on Rue Frédéric Chopin where he engaged and struck up in a very edifying conversation with this highly defensive assassin.

—Mr. Lapointe, I'd first like to inform you that all the evidence in my possession, along with the relevant supporting testimonies, is deposited in two envelopes hidden in different locations. Therefore, it would be a bad idea for you and... and for me, too, I were to have a serious "accident" in the next few days. In that case, a notary would open a certain envelope which would show that you were involved not only in my disappearance but also in my previous assassination attempt, as well as in the murder of Madame Bouriane.

Réal was bluffing. He'd found this trick in a fourpenny detective novel. He hadn't prepared anything like it, and the assassin could make him disappear with impunity, without the slightest risk. It wasn't courage but rather recklessness or... let's face it... incompetence. It was a poker game with his own life and the adrenaline was giving him a cold sweat. He loved facing a dangerous tiger.

—*But...*

—*No! Please! Don't protest. It's useless. I'm not here to get you into trouble... not you!*

—*What do you want then?*

—*I'd like to know who was behind Aïcha Bouriane's murder.*

—*But I have nothing to do with Aïcha Bouriane. I don't even know her. I've heard about her in the papers.*

—*Of course you know the Bouriane family. You've come to their house for dinner a few times.*

—*That's not true. I don't know them and you're starting to piss me off...*

The man stood up, clenching his fists.

—*Wait a moment before playing victim. I'm going to give you a first clue as to how deeply you're up to your neck in this murder.*

—*I'm listening! Hurry up before I gut you!*

Réal felt that he had to play it tight and convince the man at all costs, otherwise he might have a bad time and go back to the Beyond, sooner than expected, and this time without a return ticket. He had to bluff convincingly. It was a matter of life and death.

—*Your phone records, Réal improvised, shows that you were in episodic contact with the Bourianes. You were friends, and I can*

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prove it in the Assize Court.

Rodolphe took his face in his hands.

—*Well, it's a fact. I knew them, but that doesn't make me a murderer. I had nothing against this woman. I rather liked her.*

—*What I'd like to confirm, because I've got my own idea on the subject, is the answer to the following question: Who sponsored you?*

—*No one, it's not me, damn!*

—*I promise to get you a deal with the prosecutor if you agree to charge the sponsor. Was it the mob?*

—*Not at all, exclaimed Rodolphe, his eyes wide with fear.*

—*Who, then? Her husband?*

—...

—*It's her husband, isn't it?*

—*Yes!*

—*Why?*

—*Because she wanted a divorce... He told me his wife had allowed herself to be contaminated by the feminists here.*

—*Why did she want a divorce?*

—*I think he was violent. He didn't admit it to me, but I noticed that he was talking to her disrespectfully,... with irritation and arrogance.*

—*That's right. I knew it, Réal lied again, but I wanted to hear it confirmed.*

—*And... Why didn't he just divorce her, like everyone else, instead of butchering her?*

—*He told me that she was going to take her children from him, and he didn't want to lose them.*

—*I see.*

—*He told me that the laws here considered fathers to be purveyors of money and breadwinners, with no rights over their children; And he couldn't accept that.*

—*But the courts... They're not for moose!*

—*He had no confidence in the Justice of our country. He told me that in family matters, men are always wrong and that he was going to take matters into his own hands.*

—*You confirm my hypothesis... How much did he give you for this action, and where did you hide the money because there is no bank transfer, lied Réal who had not checked anything at all.*

—*Three thousand dollars. He paid me half of it in cash before "delivery"... that is, before... the execution. The rest will be paid in six months. He promised me a hundred dollars to kill you.*

—*\$100 only?*

The modest bounty to kill him was most humiliating. As he left Montreal by the Félix-Leclerc highway, Réal thought of how displeased Nasser must have been to see him reappear. For several reasons. First, his return involved that he would have to cover the normal cost of the investigation. But that was not the main cause of his fear. He feared that, by investigating the various mafias to find out which one had ordered his wife's death, the organized crime networks would find out that Nasser had wanted them to take the blame, and would therefore decide to liquidate him.



●Epilogue●

What a pleasure it was for Réal to present his well-constructed, well-supported case to the Sûreté du Québec, which only had to take credit for solving the enigma.

The Assizes trial (Court of Queen's Bench) of Nasser Bouriane took place at the Joliette Palais de Justice from July 8 to 27 of the following year. The murderer was sentenced to life imprisonment with fifteen years in prison. By behaving like an angel, he could hope to be released two years later, and perhaps even less, so unlimited was the leniency of the judges. Rodolphe Lapointe, tried a few months later, was given only five years for the murder of the woman, thanks to his testimony against Nasser. He would be released on parole shortly thereafter. The only ones who lost were the two Bouriane children. The Social Services of Quebec placed them in foster homes with a Muslim family in Montreal. Réal, for his part, took great pride in this inquiry. But he had to be satisfied with his pride because he was never paid for his unusual investigations, as his client was incarcerated.

In the end, Réal understood that it was in his interest to devote himself entirely to the lighter cases of stolen bicycles. There is less risk and pay is assured.

The hardest on his self-esteem was when, during the criminal trial, he heard the defendant Nasser affirm that he had chosen Réal as his private investigator because, and I quote, "he knew he was totally incompetent and even a little stupid, and he was sure he wouldn't get any results."

—*But I did it!* Réal said in the silent courtroom. The judge frowned as he looked at Réal for this intrusion, which was unacceptable according to the law, but so gratifying for him, especially when he

saw the look of hatred that the accused gave him.

Although Réal's professional life was not significantly altered, this episode nevertheless marked a drastic change in the course of his family and marital life. The derogatory and even defamatory comments of his wife and children, heard before his dreamlike journey through the various Paradises of the Universe, made him identify his own shortcomings as a father and husband. He realized he wasn't devoting enough time to his family's life.

Most humans are not so lucky. They bathe in their mistakes all their lives, and are only able to regret them when it's too late, when they hear their children, now grown up, reproach them for not having been adequate parents, before they, in turn, are reproached by their own children.

From that day on, Réal decided to work an "8 to 5" shift, i.e. to limit his investigations to a normal working day. His late afternoons and evenings were entirely devoted to his beloved wife and children, in whom he took the utmost interest. So much so that they somewhat regretted the time when he was always absent.

—Dad, you're always on our backs, now!

The right balance is hard to find. Besides, before dropping into one of his armchairs, Réal got into the habit of murmuring:

—I am sorry, Désirée (or Geraldine, or Eulalie, depending on the chair or armchair), but I'm tired from my day work.

And he guessed the answer:

—You can fall on me without restriction, Réal. I'm an angelic ghost, and you're just a man. Basically, it gives me a certain pleasure. It brings back fun earthly memories that I unfortunately cannot enjoy in our Christian Paradise.

At other times he thought of all those beauties, of all those

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irresistible and magnificent women and all those gays walled up in degrading roles; he also thought of all those golds, all those wonders, all those laughs with which God showered His affectionate Chosen ones to thank them for having submitted to His will. By bringing to earth a tiny part of these heaps of gold, a small portion of these grandiose pearls and diamonds as huge as rocks, perhaps he could give a daily meal to all mankind, or at least to each of the children who are dying of starvation.

As for his dear close friend Gérald Prudhomme, Réal now found him less interesting and managed to keep him away from his family for good, because too much intimacy between two couples is very often indicative of atoms that are a little too close to each other.

The marriage counselor who lived next door, had told him all that one day, but he hadn't believed him. Today he believed in it.



Jean-Claude Castex

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