

really, except for this designer-label thing.

Magali's dad was called Daniel Lescure. And Daniel Lescure was exactly my type. He looked a bit like Richard Anconina, not really handsome but making you melt when he looked at you. As for me, I'm more the Bernadette Lafont sort. Normans are supposed to be reserved, if not cold, but personally, I was never reserved. My dad came from the south of the *Département*, and that's probably where I get my personality from. On that day, anyway, in the school corridor, Anconina and I looked like quite a cast. It was two years ago, in October. He came to see me about his daughter's weight-related problem. That's what he called it, weight-related. I liked the way he talked about Magali. You could feel that she meant everything to him, that he admired her, that he found her wonderful. If it hadn't been for this weight problem. He was obsessed with it, and since he had to let her have lunch in school because of his job, he would have liked me to keep an eye on her. He would have liked me to forbid her to have a second helping of noodles. I tried at first, but with the best will in the world, making comments to Magali in front of her classmates wasn't really tactful, I found. So, pretty soon, I just let it go. Magali had all the time in the world to go on a diet later. When you work in the school cafeteria, kids like that who always wipe their plates clean and ask for more are a gift from God. You rather want to please them. You just want to. Magali made you want to. No matter how well-developed she was, she was still a little girl. I don't know why I just said "was." I was sure that she would be found, I could feel it, and the police superintendent asked me: but how can you be so sure of it, Mrs. Fontaine, how? Intuition, Officer, intuition. Take Jean Richard, he wouldn't look for things, he would just find them. He wouldn't try to understand the situation, he would digest it. There it was, the Normandy way of life. I garner, I garner, and I ruminate. Same for Bruno Cremer. Same for Picasso. All you need is a trigger. I know my kids. She will be found.

The little police superintendent took a toothpick from his pocket and popped it in his mouth. He looked puzzled. He sure didn't expect

the Picasso reference. A dinner lady isn't supposed to quote Picasso. I moved on to Jean Richard's investigations in *PifPoche*, 1974, I had the complete series at home. I could have gone on and on about him, his menagerie, his accident, all that, but I had to go to my aquaerobics class. I live really close to the swimming pool, next to the public library, so it would be a shame not to go. Before the New Town was built, I used to live in the village, in a house with a long and narrow garden. When my mother had her accident, I sold the house and moved into a flat. It was a great relief. No more lawn to mow, no more Virginia creeper to trim. No more tiles to watch on stormy nights. A real bathroom. Toilets that can be cleaned with bleach. A kitchen with a sink at the right height. Constant hot water. And kids playing on the concrete. When one of them starts crying, the whole building checks on him through the window. Those in the village don't understand. They are scared to come to the concrete. They say that the New Town is an aberration. They say it's a construction mistake, especially the train station in the middle of the fields. Do I look like I would live in a construction mistake? By the way, we shouldn't say New Town any more but Modern Metropolis, that's what the signs say since the Government left the Regional Councils in charge, but I can't get used to it. I must be like Magali's father, a little bit old-fashioned. Construction mistake or not, trees grow, children are born, the new Mayor decided to install a bench where Magali used to sit and eat sweets. She would spend all her pocket money on them. Yes, this kid was really into food, but honestly, she was so pretty, so curvy, and with such big arms that she looked like a little doll. Yes, that's what I called her, the police superintendent wrote down the first time he questioned me, I called her my doll, my little doll.

On the Friday, I didn't lay her place. Naïma decided on her own to come and help me push the cart, just like that, without me asking. My mobile rang in the middle of the meal. It was Martinsky calling. He sounded tense. He wanted to warn me, maybe he wouldn't be there next Tuesday. Cops were waiting for him on his doorstep. There was a silence. Then he went on in a very clear voice: I'm innocent, that little asshole bullshitted them.

And he rang off.

That little asshole was called Kévin Pétrel. I knew his mother, she went to the aquaerobics class with me. She was a typical A+ student. Always first in the lane, her swimming cap pulled down to her eyes not to ruin her hair dye. She would get out of the water ten minutes after everybody else so as to be able to swim some more. She was basically a nice woman, but so hung-up about her own performance that she became really tiresome. At the end of the meeting in the little blue room, Kévin Pétrel had stood in a corner with the policewoman. He had said what he hadn't dared say in front of everybody. Magali would let people touch her grapefruits for one euro.

The cop held his shoulders, talked to him very nicely, as if he was slightly retarded.

- And who would she let touch her grapefruits, son?

Kévin had not replied. That wasn't the point. In his opinion—and the other classmates who would hear the news later would all agree—letting people touch your grapefruits was nothing extraordinary. But for so little money!

That definitely was a mystery.

In the late afternoon, the little police superintendent himself had visited the Pétrels. And the police superintendent had got what he was looking for, a name, before the weekend: Martinsky.

The jail can be seen from the train station. Only men sentenced to long prison terms are kept there, maybe Martinsky was transferred somewhere else. As I wasn't sure, I walked past the prison several times this morning. If Martinsky's window overlooks the road to the lakes, he will know that I am thinking about him. But thinking about him might not be the most important thing to do right now. Precisely because people from the neighbourhood are thinking about him a bit too much. They loathe him. They throw rubbish into his garden. They slip crazy notes into his mailbox. It has been a real procession since they heard he got arrested. One of them even wrote "WI'LL GET YOU" on a piece of cardboard and nailed it to his door, just as owls used to be nailed to barn doors. The most painful thing for me was the way the

children took it. They all went for the grapefruit version. Kévin Pétrel was showing off during playground, in just one day he had become Mr Popular. That Martinsky guy, he would tell journalists, we have to walk past his house to get to school. We don't like seeing him there, always sitting behind the second floor window, pretending to be working.

Martinsky was definitely the sitting man. There was neither a barbecue nor a trellis in his garden. Not even a clothesline. This naked piece of lawn stuck out like a sore thumb on the estate. Martinsky would only leave his desk to go grocery shopping on his moped twice a week. He would sometimes also leave at night, on his erappy 103. No one knew where he went. He would ride for miles. He was a reserved guy, not the type to blabber about his love life. Not the type to touch Magali's breasts either, even at a bargain price. People would say that Martinsky is not one for going out much, and they'd say he would not even get up to pee. That was the big joke in school, the pec puddle under Martinsky's chair. Kids would pass it on from class to class, and even the little ones in kindergarten—who did however come in through another street—would share the joke with a mixture of fear and fascination.

Later that day, I came across the police superintendent in front of the City Hall. He was with a bunch of colleagues who were returning empty-handed from a combing operation. If I were to give them some advice, it would be to check all the bakeries first. That's where they would have a chance of hearing about Magali Lescure.

- Tom Thumb used to leave a trail of stones behind him. Magali scatters euros.

I regretted those words as soon as I'd spoken them. They would make the connection with Martinsky. Why would she let people fondle her? To go and buy sweets. And why would she buy sweets? Because she loved sweets, just like any other kid. And because they were forbidden at home. But the little police superintendent didn't seem to make the connection. OK, OK, he answered absent-mindedly. Since I had found out that he was staying at the Formule 1 motel, by the motorway, my faith in him had slipped a notch or two. Bruno Cremer would have

stopped at the village guesthouse. Jean Richard at the Golf Hotel. Locals would have seen them leaning on the parapet watching the swans glide slowly by on the water. I wasn't sure what good could come of a stingy police superintendent sleeping with earplugs. Martinsky would not be going home any time soon. My mother used to tell me: girl, count on yourself because if you start counting on your neighbour, you won't get nowhere. So I went back home, collected my swimming stuff and I went to my second aquaerobics class, like every Saturday.

When I saw Kévin Pétrel hold his nose and jump into the water, splashing the couple of elderly people who were bravely walking towards the side of the pool, I realised that I would take my dear mum's word for it. The class was over, Kévin was being told off by the retired folks, so he wanted to leave, but his mother wanted to swim a bit more, as usual, the five extra minutes that make all the difference in the butt department. I told her: take your time, Mrs. Pétrel, I will take care of your son. We ended up together in the showers. I stood in front of him. We'd soon see how brave he was.

- You made it up, about Martinsky, I said clearly.

Kévin pretended not to hear. I came closer, standing real straight. His head was about as high as my chest. I was wearing my black swimsuit, the one from La Redoute. He started showering, cool as a cucumber. The kid certainly had plenty of poise. I repeated: you made it all up, that grapefruit story. I spoke very low, but I was screaming inside.

- Shall I tell your mum that you never eat your meat with your school diuner? I threatened.

Kévin took it on the chin. The water was running down his shoulders. I didn't know I had it in me. Didn't know I could be that violent. I snatched the shampoo bottle from his hands.

- Will you answer, you little piece of shit?

He still wouldn't say a word. Martinsky was in jail because of a stupid kid who had watched too much TV. I poured the liquid into my hand and I told him: this will end up in your eyes if you keep on lying. I was shaking as I slammed him against the wall.

- It wasn't Martinsky, he mumbled with his mouth twisted, it was no one.

I didn't let up.

- Will you repeat that in front of the cops?

He would. I stepped back, reminding him about the meat business. His mother was coming in, her flip-flops were squeaking on the tiled floor. I turned round. Mrs. Pétrel, your son has something important to tell you. Kévin was erylng now.

- It's not true, about Martinsky, he spat out between two hiccups.

I didn't hear the rest. I left to get my stuff from my locker. My heart was probably beating as fast as Kévin Pétrel's. Had I just threatened a kid? Had I just called him a little piece of shit? I had just fucked up, big time. But at least they would release Martinsky.

There was a message from the police superintendent waiting for me on my answering machine. He wanted to see me as soon as possible. When I entered the police station, I understood that the investigation had moved up a gear. In spite of the late hour, the corridors were swarming with people. All witnesses agreed. Martinsky had been out between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. on the day Magali went missing. They had not found anything when they searched his house but on the river banks of the Eure, near the bridge, they had found what had once been Magali's braided bracelet. The frogmen were already searching the river bed. An incident room was going to be set up in the Community Health Centre. The little police superintendent pushed me in front of him, in a gesture I didn't like. I tried to tell him about Kévin Pétrel, but he cut me short.

- I'm the one doing the talking, he said, checking how flexible his toothpick was. So, I hear you add extra butter to the school dinners, and cream to the yogurts. I even heard you serve your kids extra desserts!

I didn't expect him to talk about food. I had a sudden fit of sneezing. My hair was still wet. Had I known, I would have taken the time to blow-dry it.

- I asked yo

- A question?

- Do you add butter and...?

- Yes, Officer, and I even add sugar to the grated carrots dressing. And on the last Friday before the school holidays, I make *teurgoule*¹ for my kids. Do you at least know what *teurgoule* is?

- Mrs. Fontaine...

- You may not give a damn what children eat, but I do! Do you realize that this may be the only proper meal of the day for some children?

I could feel the anger that had overwhelmed me at the pool coming back up. Around here, we call "police" the mould that appears on cider when the barrel is nearly empty. Why the heck should the superintendent care about butter and cream? My hands started shaking again. I folded my arms. I had to calm down, otherwise things would get ugly for me and for Martinsky. Just breathe in, think of Bruno Cremer, of his Newfoundland-terrier side when he calls prostitutes "love." I had to be patient with the person I was speaking to. Everybody had their own working methods, and I was the last one to judge him on that. I lowered my voice.

- I want you to know, Officer, that I do pay for all these things myself, when it comes to improvements.

He wrote down the information. The phone rang. No, he had no statement to make for the moment, the investigation was still in progress. They would hold a press conference in the evening. I wondered if he would tell the journalists about me. He picked up another telephone and ordered the person to be let into the room. And the man that came in, looking all at sea, was Daniel Lescure, Magali's father.

I nearly died of embarrassment. If I had thrown myself into this investigation head first, I suddenly realized, it was not only to help Martinsky, but also because I was partly responsible for Magali's plumpness. I had helped make her body attractive. Make it mouth-watering. The little police superintendent resumed the questioning.

¹*Teurgoule* is a dessert from Normandy made of milk, sugar, rice and cinnamon.

He asked me why I had not told them that I had a personal relationship with the suspect. It was only later that I understood that his questions about the cafeteria were only an *hors d'œuvre*, an appetizer. With Lescure there, we were starting the *entrée*.

- Why haven't you told us about your relations with Marthinsky, he repeated, not mincing his words.

- Because Martinsky has nothing to do with it. He's not into little girls. You can just ask Kévin Pétre's mother. The kid made it all up...

- Leave the Pétre's alone, will you? What I'd like to know is why you insist on protecting Martinsky. You're the one he called before he got arrested.

- Called...

- Don't try to dodge the question, we had his phone tapped. We have the recording. He mentioned Tuesday. What were you supposed to do together on Tuesday?

I'd rather keep to myself what I was going to do at Martinsky's, for it had nothing to do with Magali's going missing. This guy was confusing everything.

- You do have a copy of his key, don't you? You were seen entering his house.

- Yes, he did give me a copy to... to water his plants when he goes on holiday.

- On holiday? Martinsky going on holiday, that's news!

- Well.. he does visit his brother.. sometimes.

The phone rang again. The police superintendent's attitude totally changed when he recognized the voice of the caller. He straightened up, his toothpick stood to attention, and he switched to the obsequious tone of forty-year-old men who are at a watershed in their careers. What he had to say was none of our business. He gestured to his colleague to show us out, we would resume the questioning in the morning. I found myself with Daniel Lescure in the police station car park. I couldn't believe I was free to go. I must say that if I had been a cop,

I wouldn't have been happy with such evasive answers. Lescure was walking slowly, he was putting his feet down in a strange way, as if he was afraid of hurting the ground. His Volvo estate, that still had a Paris number plate, wasn't parked straight. He tried to open the door but had no luck. The key wouldn't go in. He looked up at me.

- All I would like to know, he said in a strange voice, is what you were doing at Martinsky's.

- I clean his place.

- You clean his place?

- Yes, I work as a maid, on the side. I do the floors, the ironing. Not the type of thing you should be telling the cops. I'm a municipal employee, so moonlighting isn't likely to best please my bosses at the Town Hall. Can you imagine if the papers heard about it? I could be sacked. What would I do, without my kids?

A vague smile flickered on Magali's dad's lips. He walked around his car and came close to me. I stepped back. When he held out his hand to make peace, I realised that he was dead drunk.

Lescure mumbled a few excuses. He could not take the wheel in his state, would I be kind enough to drive him back? We did not speak during the journey. I helped him settle on the living room couch, and as I pretended to make coffee, I went to check out Magali's room. There was a big picture of her mother on the wall in front of her bed. And under the picture, a bunch of little things, placed like offerings around a bowl full of dolls. The reason I understood that things in Magali's mind were probably not straightforward was that the dolls were placed upside down, their legs dangling over the edge of the bowl, like a flower spray. Their dresses fell in corollas. Strange bunch of flowers for a kid. Strange picture too. Magali's mother looked very young. She was wearing too much makeup. You could see her in medium close shot, draped in a bath towel with the French national colours. I jumped at Lescure's voice. Could I pass him the hottle of Scotch standing on the kitchen table?

Richard Anconina was all mine. Even dead drunk, it was a gift. Anconina had a slight Léotard twist and a little featherbrained look

about him that made him even more attractive than usual. I asked him whether he had told his wife that Magali was missing. I could picture her turning up in the middle of the night. Considering the state the husband was in, I preferred to keep on the safe side.

- My wife? We... we've quite lost touch... all touch, really. We're all still very close in spirit, Magali needs her mum so much, but as things are...

He couldn't finish his sentence and it wasn't just because of the liquor. He asked me whether I would lie next to him. I emptied my glass at once. His hand reached for the stereo. He was wearing a silver ring on his forefinger. Carla Bruni's voice filled the space. I was a bit embarrassed because I smelled of chlorine. He snuggled up to me. Pleasure ran through my whole body. How could one be so happy in such a sad situation? I stroked his hair. We were children afraid of the storm, and if our thoughts could have become visible, like in comics, there would have been only one balloon for the two of us. One balloon with a single face: Magali's.

Martinsky was released the next day in the early afternoon, since no serious charges had been laid against him. He had been seen on his moped, and what was he doing? He was riding around. There were no tyre prints on the banks of the Eure. His fingerprints were not on the bracelet, only Magali's. And Kévin Petrel's.

In the cafeteria, on Monday, the children were behaving too well. Even Matthieu looked downcast. I didn't like seeing them like that, as if they had lost all hopes of finding their friend. Because as long as Martinsky had been in jail, they had had some hope. They could imagine things. Horrible things, indeed, but at least they could imagine. Now deprived of any identified suspect, they were at loss. Helpless. They had nothing to hold on to, a real void. Kévin Pérel had been relegated to the end of table. He was avoiding eye contact, and was trying hard to eat his meat. I knew he hated it. I went over to see him and I whispered: forget it, about your meat, we'll just forget about it.

He kept on chewing, and as I saw his nose wrinkle when he had

to swallow, I was hopeful again. Kévin Pétrel still felt guilty about something, otherwise why would he still be eating his meat? I had to question him again. I, the dinner lady, had to grill him. I tried to catch him around the cafeteria door. He slipped through my fingers. In the playground in the afternoon, he stuck to his teacher. More dolled up than ever, his mum came to pick him up after school. Should I wait for the next swimming pool session to end up alone with him again? I was scared of this new confrontation. How would Kévin react? Would he be as easily impressed as the first time? And what if he told the police about it? Then, what we would all come to consider a miracle happened. That same evening, when we expected it least, Magali turned up again. I was in the bathroom with her father and suddenly there she was, same as always, maybe a bit thinner, but in good health and obviously happy to be back home. The first thing she did when she entered her room was to remove her mother's picture. She turned the dolls back up and, in a firm voice, she said that enough was enough, although we didn't know who exactly she was talking to. She said she had to start growing up.

The little police superintendent was never able to work out why Kévin had placed the bracelet on the banks of the Eure. Magali claimed it was a sign to her father, so that he wouldn't worry. The Pétrels lived on the fourth floor of a charmless building, one of those clone buildings from the seventies suffering from early aging. It's in their basement that Magali had hidden. What had convinced her to go home? The batteries for her radio were flat, the days were long and time dragged, and since the swimming pool episode, Kévin wasn't so sure he wanted to win his bet anymore. He was the one who would bring her down food every morning. When I told them about Martinsky, they did not understand how serious was the story they'd made up. We just wanted to pull his leg, Kévin would say. Pull the leg of the sitting man. I sighed. Magali looked down. Her hair was falling like brackets around her pretty face. So I remembered those hours my brothers and I used to spend hiding in the woods near the railway line hoping that the train would leave the tracks. I don't know where we had got the idea from, but a stone

on the tracks was supposed to be enough to derail the train. We would go to quarries just to pick up big flint stones with sharp edges. Hiding in the bushes, we would wait, intoxicated with the illusion of our omnipotence. We were very disappointed when the train would drive past without even slowing down. At the time, it was still possible to open the windows. Sometimes a little girl would lean out in spite of the stern warning printed in four languages. Her hair would dance in the wind. We never thought about what might happen to her if the train derailed. All we wanted was to stop time. Rouen was only twenty miles away. To us, it was the end of the world.