SHORTLISTED FOR THE CWA GOLD DAGGER CRIME NOVEL OF THE YEAR

PATRICIA DUNCKER

'Duncker out-Dan-Browns Dan Brown … thrilling' *Daily Telegraph*

# The STRANGE CASE of the COMPOSER and his JUDGE

BLOOMSBURY

# The Strange Case of the Composer and his Judge

PATRICIA DUNCKER

BLOOMSBURY
LONDON • BERLIN • NEW YORK • SYDNEY

*For S.J.D.*

*I saw Eternity the other night,*
*Like a great ring of pure and endless light,*
*All calm, as it was bright;*
*And round beneath it, Time in hours, days, years,*
*Driv'n by the spheres*
*Like a vast shadow moved; in which the world*
*And all her train were hurled.*

Henry Vaughan

*Gelobt sei uns die ew'ge Nacht …*
*Let us praise eternal night …*

Novalis

I

# HUNTERS IN THE SNOW

The bodies were found early in the afternoon of New Year's Day. Hunters in the forest were rounding up their dogs, pulling their hats close over their ears against the frost, and heading for home. Several centimetres of snow had fallen in the night, and by dawn, when they had set out, the air sliced their lungs and faces, clean and hard. The trails on the lower slopes remained clear, but slush and ice rendered the tracks on high ground above the rocks impassable. They bagged two hares, and watched the deer rushing through the mangled green, leaping the fallen trunks left by the storms, but let them go. The hunters waded through the snow, discouraged by the devastated landscape and blocked paths. Every endeavour to negotiate clear space was thwarted and baffled. New Year's Day. Someone proposed a tot of eau-de-vie, hot coffee and his wife's chocolate-cream gâteau. A small fête for the New Year. Let's go home. They called out to one of their number who was pissing against a pile of frozen logs. But he didn't move or turn. He had seen something strange in the clearing below him.

This man, who lived just eight kilometres away from the white space where the bodies were discovered, had already seen the cars, five of them, massed at odd angles around the holiday chalet where, it was assumed, the gathering had passed their last night. He had noted the registrations – not one from the local department – and the wealth to which the vehicles bore witness: two Land Cruisers, 4 × 4s, a Renault

Espace, a plush black Mercedes. Big slick vehicles from Paris, Nancy, Lyon. One of the cars was registered in Switzerland. He had noticed the CH sticker on the boot. But at that moment, when he raised his eyes from the steaming arc of his own piss, he did not associate the pattern in the snow beneath him with the visitors to the mountains. He peered forwards, uncertain. Were they tree trunks, already severed and arranged, awaiting transport? Surely he imagined the bare patches in the bark, which looked like faces, and the branches splintered open, like palms facing upwards. Two of his friends trudged over to his side and followed his stare down the rock face to the clearing.

All at once they knew that these were people, real people, tranquil, beautiful, arranged in a symmetrical half-circle, lying in the snow beneath them, and that every single one was dead.

There is no need for urgency if death has gone before us. Yet still they hurried, clambered in rapid silence down the icy fissure in the rock face, shouldering their guns, scuffing their gloves on the boulders. Quick! We must get to them. We must call for help. The dogs whined, yelped, then set off round the longer sloping route through the trees, their noses snuffling the hardening snow. They blundered downward, frightened, eager. But when they stood, puffing and confused, their breath condensing in clouds, before the silent, frozen forms, lapped in fresh snow, they lost all inclination to speak or act. They held back their dogs and spoke in whispers.

'Appelle les pompiers. Et les flics. Call the emergency services. And the cops. Qu'est-ce que tu attends? What are you waiting for? Go on, do it.'

The hunter's hands, which had killed many times and were always steady on his gun, now slithered and twitched over the buttons on his mobile phone. His dog circled the bodies, wary, uncertain.

But the signal fluctuated. How many? Where? You're breaking up. Give me your exact position. The hunter gestured helplessly to his friends, and now they all had an opinion. This is the easiest way to find us. This is the road to take. Mais non, passe-moi le portable! Each one of them knew the body of the forest like a lover,

all her secrets fingered and touched. They had walked every trail in all seasons; they knew the thickets, the buried cleft with the soft falling water, the deep pools. They nosed out the scents of the forest with an instinct as uncanny and subtle as their dogs. They knew every sound, every spoor, could smell the earth as keenly as the creatures they hunted: moss, water, fear. They would stand silent for hours, watching over their prey, tenderly plotting their kill, with the impassioned concentration of a bridegroom, waiting for the beloved to stir. Now they huddled together at the edge of the clearing, giving one another advice, puzzled, insecure, their voices lowered, not out of respect for the frozen dead, but in case they could hear.

Eventually it was decided that one of them should descend to the lower trails, where the mobile phone could locate a clear signal and the emergency services, taking the dogs with him, to wait at the crossroads where the tarmac ended and their abandoned vans nuzzled the forest. He could guide the police, pompiers, premiers secours, all the necessary procession which promised the help no longer needed. As he tramped away into the misty, declining light the others gathered together, fearful guardians of whatever had been accomplished in the clearing on the brink of the ravine. They did not study the bodies but looked out over the snowy hills and shattered tunnels of broken trees. Mist boiled in the distant valleys; the white light, deepening to blue, veiled the horizon. The best of the day had already gone.

They began counting the dead.

The bodies lay close together, woven into a pattern. Nine adults, partially exposed in the soft wash of snow, stretched out upon their backs, settled into a sedate, reclining curve. Their elbows were bent back, their hands raised, palms facing upwards, as if they had all completed a complex movement in the dance, and died in the very act. The hunters did not pry too closely, but stood back enthralled, for they were used to death. The dead and the moment of dying accompanied them through the forest, their daily companions, who held no secrets from them. But this was an event of a different order.

The black fixed eyes gaped open, gazing at the winter sky, their lashes and eyebrows white with frost. The hunters kept their distance, not because they were afraid, but because they were disturbed by the bodies of the children.

The children formed a smaller group, nestled at the feet of the adults, like loyal greyhounds carved on the tombs of heroes. The curled figures were wearing pyjamas beneath their outdoor coats and heavily swaddled in blankets; their arms and fingers tucked away, invisible in gloves and mittens. Two of them embraced half-chewed fluffy animals, a panda, a small grey koala bear. The youngest child looked tiny, perhaps just over a year old. Who would murder little children and then lay them with such careful tenderness at their parents' feet? The woods cracked and whispered with the coming frost. As the light shrank into the pines the hunters heard the murmur of diesel engines, then voices approaching from the left, at last, the crunch of heavy boots breaking the snow's crust. Dark figures, laden with bulky equipment, arc lights, cameras, grey plastic coffins roped to sledges, rose towards them, moving slowly through the trees.

★ ★ ★

The officer in charge of the police investigation rummaged in the pockets of his hooded coat. There was still enough light to make out the tracks around the half-circle of bodies. He began to draw upon a pad.

'Vous n'avez rien touché? Are you sure you didn't touch the bodies?' He accused the hunters, without even looking at them.

'We haven't gone near the bodies.'

'So whose tracks are these?'

Three sets of indentations in the snow marked the outer circle. The most recent belonged to the dogs.

'Deer. Those tracks were left by deer.'

The deer had come very close. They must have stood over the dead, then gently stepped away, back into the shadowed green.

The oldest marks were half filled with fresh snow. A flurry of tracks hovered near one of the bodies. This corpse occupied a central place at the circle's core, and they could now see that it was a woman's face, pale and shocked by the suddenness of her death, her mouth gaped slightly open, her white tongue visible. She was not young, but her face was drawn in strong lines and bold gestures, her dark hair flooded back, escaping from the furred hood of her coat. The Commissaire stared at her face for a long time, then blew on his fingers and continued drawing the scene, while his white-suited myrmidons, all looking puzzled rather than shocked, staked out the circle to include the tracks. No one looked closely at the children.

'Any sign of the Judge yet?' snapped the Commissaire. 'I rang her over an hour ago.'

The hunters felt excluded from their discovery. No one asked their opinion. Why weren't they suspects? They had seen enough crime scenes on TV to know that whoever admitted to the discovery of the body had usually committed the murder, except in the case of dead wives, where the husband, absent or present, was always the only one with the motive. And here they were, armed to the teeth, with enough ammunition to massacre the forest, yet no one had even asked for an alibi. The hunters were not ignorant men. They were trained to read signs, even small signs, a broken branch, a snapped twig, a disturbance in the waters. They watched the white ghosts of the police scientifique moving quickly, staking out the bodies, photographing each face in turn, the flash slapping the snow in a sudden white flare. And then they realised what was missing from each man's face. No one balked on the brink of the circle as the hunters had done. They strode forth like conquerors, buckled beneath the weight of their equipment. They carried the right things. They had expected to see this strange gathering of the dead, arranged in precisely this pattern, hidden from the world on a remote outcrop in the forest. They had all known what awaited them. They had seen this before.

'Voilà. Vous pouvez disposer. Come into the main station tomorrow morning at 9 a.m. to sign your statements. This officer will

take down your names, addresses and telephone numbers. We will interview you again before the end of the week. Cartes d'identité? Thank you. And please don't talk to the press. Do you understand that? Not a word to the journalists.'

They were dismissed.

Yet these men were the first witnesses to the events in the forest, the first to ask questions about the unfinished circle and the bodies of the children. These three men were the first to debate whether the members of the gathering had been murdered or chosen their own deaths, the first to wonder why the circle remained incomplete, the first to marvel at the children, tucked carefully into the space created beneath the feet of the men and women who had given them their lives and then, for the hunters assumed that this was so, had watched them die. The hunters strode down the ice trails, their boots leaving complete treads in the mud beneath the cracking sheets of ice, past the wooden chalet now surrounded with yellow tape, overrun with gendarmes and dark men without uniforms probing furniture, digging in suitcases. The cars were all opened, and painstakingly examined under the sizzling glare of artificial lights by men with supple white gloves, as if the machines themselves were also cadavers concealing their secrets. All the doors and windows of the chalet stood open to the leering cold.

The hunters retreated, clutching their guns, and their breath gleamed white in the twilight as they descended the mountain, climbing the fallen trunks, avoiding the police armed with chainsaws, who were clearing the trails. They could hear the muffled howls of their dogs, locked in the vans, long before the half-hidden vehicles loomed through the pines. A large dark car, wheels churning the slush, rose past them. They stepped back, nodding to the woman within. She returned their gaze with a flat blank stare. They feared that she was one of the relatives, one who had been summoned, one who already knew. Now the forest rustled with voices and the chortle of machines. The hunters slipped away.

★ ★ ★

The winter sky surrendered cold blue into engulfing dark beneath the pines as the Judge's car, a borrowed Kangoo, one of the more recent models, fitted with four-wheel drive, lurched up the track. She surged past the startled men standing in shadow, all armed with rifles, apparently captured in the process of vanishing. The car slithered to a standstill on the rim of the scene around the chalet, which now resembled a film set, trailing wires, arc lights and cameras, the actors busy in rehearsal. The Judge wore mud-spattered boots, an old brown overcoat and red leather gloves. Everyone stood back respectfully as she hovered outside the circle, gazing inwards. Her glasses had black frames and the thick lenses glittered under the lights. No one spoke. Everybody waited to take the next cue from her. She was now the principal element to be reckoned with in this eerie drama. One of the men stepped forward.

'Madame le Juge? Monsieur le Commissaire is waiting for you. I'll take you up.' He carried a large torch, which was not yet necessary as they retraced the hunters' tracks through the pines in the half-light. The earth hardened beneath them. The Judge could smell the ice forming, a rigid, fresh smell of damp, oozing resin and wet earth.

'There's a sheer rock face just behind them,' said the officer, 'so I'll take you round. It's a bit longer, but enough of us have already been over the ground.'

The Judge nodded.

'We'll have to carry them down on stretchers. The track is blocked at too many points by fallen trees for the pompiers to get up there. And the snow's too deep,' he added as an afterthought.

The Judge slipped a little in the murky slush. He put out his arm to help her. She waved him away. They could hear the faint hum of activity somewhere above them. He clicked on the torch. A yellow circle of light appeared in the churned snow before their advancing boots. The faint crunch as they broke the first crust of ice steadied their passage.

'Monsieur Schweigen told us not to touch any of them until you got here. He said that you'd want to see the pattern that they make in the snow.'

The Judge nodded again, but did not reply. The white path juddered and shook in the torchlight, then slithered into a firebreak, sliced up the vertical slope. The going was slower in deep snow. The officer waited for her as she rummaged in the powder with the toes of her boots, trying to find solid ground. She stretched out her arms like a tightrope walker, hesitated, then found her uneasy balance once again. The light renewed itself in the open, a distinct, luminous and deepening blue; but the mountain's flank seemed to warp the space and sounds above, which sometimes ballooned outwards into the valley, so clear that she could hear individual voices, then shrank away into whispers and echoes that thumped dull against the heavy, laden green.

'La voilà!'

Schweigen peered down the dark cliff where the rocks dripped icicles from the overhang and saw her coming, a tiny dark figure following one of his officers. He watched her bowed head and cautious steps, jubilant and relieved. She had been in Strasbourg with her brother's family, just over an hour away, and listened without comment to his agitated, rushing talk – the hunters have found the bodies in the snow. Then she simply said that she would leave at once. And now here she was. He watched her clutching the rock to steady herself in thick fallen snow at the foot of the cliff. Red gloves. He remembered those red gloves from that long winter investigation in Switzerland. She was wearing the same red gloves and she was directly below him. As if aware of his beady stare, she looked up, raising her face to his. He stretched out his hand in greeting as if to draw her up towards him. She smiled slightly, but did not hurry. The light was almost gone. I want her to see them before the light goes, before we ignite the generator and the whole place looks like a frontier outpost under siege. He slithered towards her, engulfed in a spray of wet earth, cracking branches and hardening slush.

'Bonne Année, Madame le Juge!' A small wry smile appeared in her eyes. He was so close to her that his breath steamed up her lenses. She took off her glasses and wiped them on her scarf.

'Bonne Année, André. Although best wishes do seem a little out of place here.'

He stood before her, excited as a schoolboy, full of his own prowess; he had summoned her up and she had come to him.

The Judge stepped into the blue circle of the last light on the mountains and surveyed the fan of bodies in the snow before them. The freezing gendarmes, many of them still bleary from their millennium celebrations, rustled in the slush, tense and shifty, discomfited by the tiny wrapped bodies of the children that Schweigen had forbidden them to touch. The Commissaire babbled in the Judge's ear.

'They celebrated their departure. We've found the remains of their final meal, champagne, bûche de Noël, extra presents for the children. They'd actually decorated the entire chalet.'

The Judge said nothing. She hunched her shoulders and shrank inside the hood of her winter coat, tense and bristling against the cold. For a long while she stood silent, absorbing the scene, her boots gently sinking as the melted crust of fresh snow crumbled beneath her heels. Then she set out around the periphery defined by the tape, with André Schweigen clamped to her side, gabbling quietly.

'The hunters left prints everywhere. So did their dogs. The dogs also made those marks – that scratching in the snow. There were trails left by deer too, but those were nearly gone. More snow must have fallen in the small hours. The hunters say they didn't touch the bodies. I don't think they did. It's hard to tell what the poison was. Cyanide, I should think. Like the Swiss departure. But listen, there's one – one of them –'

Schweigen's excitement became uncontainable. He stepped in front of her.

'Dominique, écoute-moi bien.' His voice dropped to a hiss. 'One of them's been shot. The woman at the core. Just as it happened in Switzerland. And the gun's not there. It's gone. We'll comb every inch. I'll sift snow through sieves if I have to, but I think the gun's gone. Obviously we'll have to wait for ballistics to confirm the facts, but I'm willing to put money on the bet that it's the same gun. Even

after six years. Someone walked away from the mountain last night. And that's not suicide, it's murder.'

'Calme-toi,' replied the Judge softly. They stopped, facing the half-circle of the enraptured dead. 'Of course it's murder. How could those tiny children consent to their own deaths? We're looking at a crime scene, André, whatever the results from your ballistics lab.'

He stopped talking and took her arm. No matter what happened this was now their investigation. They were no longer trailing in the slipstream of the Swiss, who had buried the last departure, along with the dead, in a sarcophagus of platitudes: a tragic waste, incomprehensible and heartbreaking. But for Madame le Juge nothing remained incomprehensible or beyond the reach of pure reason. The mysteries of this world stained the bright radiance of eternity. Her method, tested and consistent, was to analyse the stains. They trudged onwards, the snow sucking at their boots. The Judge gazed impassive at the white faces of the dead, absorbing each one in turn, as if every detail should be remembered for ever. The smallest children were wrapped in furred cocoons, their puckered features scarcely visible. She lingered for many minutes over the fading face of the older woman at the centre of the half-circle.

Schweigen leaned into her cheek.

'That's her, isn't it? The sister?'

'Yes. That's Marie-Cécile Laval.'

Finally the Judge stopped, stood perfectly still, and raised her eyes to the devastated forests on the surrounding slopes; the great trees, like liquidated giants, piled one upon another, their roots, naked and undignified, sprawled in their wake, the shallow holes already filled with snow. At once beautiful and desolate, the bare curves of the mountain stretched away towards the Rhine Valley and the shadows of the Black Forest in Southern Germany. The bodies all faced towards the east, to greet the rising sun. They had died in the night, certain that one short breath, wasted in this temporary world, riddled by time, was the prelude to their eternal awakening, promised in the stars.

She looked again at the huddled soundless children, tenderly enveloped in hoods, scarves, mittens. What train of reason led a woman to protect her child against the night cold then fill his mouth with poison? She slouched down into her coat, and shivered against the quiet, thickening night. Reason had nothing to do with it. Before her on the forest floor, lay an extraordinary witness to the passion, that instinctive act of love. I will never leave you; I will never abandon you in the kingdom of this world, smothered by time, age, pain, heartbreak. I shall take you with me. Lord, remember me when thou comest into thy kingdom. This day shalt thou be with me in paradise. The Judge stared at the still, frozen face of Marie-Cécile Laval. Her unimaginable act represented one last gesture of boundless love, the love that had gathered up these children and borne them forth in triumph.

★ ★ ★

The sound of a heavy vehicle thumping against the branches in the distance disturbed the motionless, iced air. The Judge raised her head like a deer at bay. Schweigen was watching her carefully.

'Have the press got hold of it yet?'

'We've had one call. The hunters found them. No matter how often you tell them not to blab, people talk.'

'Then let's get to work. But keep it quiet as long as you can. I'll need to interview the men who found them. I'll do that tomorrow morning early. Before they start seeing things in their heads and imagining details that weren't there. Have you got all the photographs?'

'Yes. And something even better than that.' Schweigen presented her with the drawings, the measurements between each body carefully noted. His record of the scene looked slightly sinister, for alongside a careful diagram showing the positions of each corpse was a sketch of the older woman's face, the open eyes and the expression of startled amazement, exactly caught.

'That's excellent,' said the Judge, thrown off guard by Schweigen's unexpected talent and the grotesque, disturbing subject.

'I was all set for the Beaux-Arts,' he said, with a small shrug of regret. 'It's harder to draw faces you've never seen before. She's the only one I knew.'

The first shift of actors surrounding the spectacle began to pack up, ready to bear the bodies away from the darkening apse of the mountain; the lorries from the morgue were stuck further down the slope. The second shift of forensic experts hovered on the brink of the circle, ready to sift through the snow, their searchlights tilted at odd angles, picking out the whitened, laden branches of the pines. Schweigen was relieved that none of his team knew any of the dead and said so. The Judge stood over the men as they lifted the children, ostensibly daring them to be anything other than gentle with the stiff, small forms, but in fact giving them something else to think about, in case anyone shuddered or cracked. She eyed them carefully. Some seemed too young, far too young, to touch the dead. As each corpse was packed up and gently zipped into a yellow folded sack its outline became momentarily visible upon the forest floor, then appeared to fade. The dead left barely a shadowed trace behind them. The gathering at the foot of the rock cliffs had already melted into the past.

'Le Parquet rang me right after you did,' said the Judge, 'and just as well he did. I had to listen to it all again and pretend I didn't know. You don't give me instructions, André, he does. If he knew that you had already been in touch with me he'd think that you were running your own private war against these people.' She gestured towards the empty clearing, now ablaze with lights as each morsel of snow was stabbed and turned.

Schweigen, unabashed, put his drawings away inside his coat and took her arm again.

'But aren't you glad I did?'

The Judge smiled slightly and they set off together, concentrating on their boots, heads bowed as if they were the chief mourners, following the slow procession into the darkness and the freezing trees.

★ ★ ★

No heating was turned on in the chalet and there was no question of turning it on until the boiler and all the electrical devices in the house had been examined and cleared. The investigating team worked into the night, swathed in mufflers, their gloved hands searching, recording, collecting. Boxes of odd personal material, diaries, notebooks, wallets, car-registration documents, meal plans, the rubbish rota, dry-cleaning stubs, were all inspected, listed and removed. There was a moment of horror and excitement when the mobile phone in one of the Land Cruisers sprang into luminous life and began to sing. The relatives had still not been contacted or informed.

'Leave it,' snapped the Judge, noting down the incoming number. The echoes of the Christmas theme tune, 'Jingle Bells', died into silence. The Judge turned to Schweigen.

'We have all their identities now. I think you can begin contacting whatever's left of their families. Let's look at that list.'

The chalet was privately owned and littered with the personal clutter that every household generates year after year. A cork poster board, overrun with holiday photographs, showed some of the dramatis personae from the clearing on the mountainside, ebullient on skis, or with raised glasses, sitting around candle-covered cakes. The local free newspaper lay abandoned behind the sofa. Schweigen checked the date. A wilted heap of flowers slumped on the table, withered with cold. The air, glacial and still, shifted like a curtain as the Judge passed softly over the threshold into the kitchen. The possessions of the dead lay scattered in the convivial disorder of a Christmas family holiday. Here were presents still resting in their wrapping paper, washing-up neatly stacked on the draining board, but not stowed away. A light still glimmered, eerie and blurred, on the telephone's screen. The words were in English: *You were called at 12.31* … and the red eye glared with the threat that *the caller has left you a message*.

'Écoutez la bande, Madame le Juge,' Schweigen suggested in respectful, formal tones. Two of his men were working in the kitchen.

'I want that board of photographs recorded,' said the Judge. 'We have to track down everyone in those pictures who isn't already on the slab in the Institut médico-légal.' She looked at Schweigen. 'All right. Play it.'

She noted down the number. It was the same one that she had recorded from the car's mobile phone. A shiver of sadness washed over her shoulders. Someone was out there, trying to get through, ringing again and again, someone who didn't know. The tape hissed and clicked. Then a man's voice spoke in English, leaving the briefest possible message.

'Cécile? Happy New Year. Please ring me today.'

And the line went dead. Schweigen checked his list.

'He's after Madame Laval. The only one who wasn't apparently poisoned. One bullet to the left temple. Very little blood loss. And the only woman whose children weren't with her.'

'Impound the tape. And I want a list of all calls to and from the chalet as far back as you can. When did they get here? December the 23rd?' She steadied her glasses and looked closely at the numbers. '0049? Isn't that Germany?'

Schweigen nodded. He plucked out the tape and labelled the bag, then looked over her shoulder at the number.

'It's a mobile. A German mobile.'

'Identify it.'

'Could be one of her family trying to get through. We should contact her children.'

'That was the voice of a man her age. Or older. Find out who he is.'

Three entire families, nine adults and seven children, had perished in the forest clearing: Marie-Cécile Laval, another older woman, possibly a grandmother, a teenage boy of seventeen, three married couples and all their children, some of them barely toddlers. They had taken their children with them. Here were all their papers, cartes d'identité, driving licences, car insurance documents, credit cards, abandoned either in the chalet or in their cars. The money left in

handbags, drawers and coats amounted to over five thousand francs. The Judge sat at the dining table in the main room of the chalet, wearing a pair of gloves borrowed from the police scientifique. Her red leather gloves, the ones that Schweigen had recognised, stuck out of her pocket. She checked all the jettisoned labels on the Christmas presents and decoded the Christmas wishes, scratched in biro on the decorated wrapping she had fished out of the waste-paper basket. Had anyone else taken part in the celebration and then returned from the mountain? The presents themselves still littered the rooms: an amber bottle of Coco from Chanel, a CD rack shaped like a giraffe, a motorised truck for one of the children that could be controlled with a télécommande, a new DVD player and a handful of war films. What on earth had possessed them to spend so much money just before they died? She began noting down the names, terms of endearment, generic names, pet names – who was 'ma petite chouchoute'? My beloved wife? That could have been any one of the three women. Before her lay a little solid pile of mobile phones. She activated each one in turn and went through the calls dialled and received and the entire mass of text messages. Hours later, she fixed André Schweigen with a steady glare, her mind elsewhere.

'They died last night. They went up the mountain long after midnight.'

'They did?'

'Yes. All the text messages on the mobiles saying Bonne Année have been read.'

'Join my team.' He grinned at her. 'Do you want to look at these photographs now or shall I bag them up?'

'Pass them over.'

He gave her a small halogen torch to amplify the light above the dining table that was still draped with swags of green pine and ivy from the forest. Jaunty strings of fairy lights flickered on the Christmas tree, changing the colours of the swaying crystal baubles. Schweigen turned off the flashing trails that chased each other round the picture rails and across the perked ears of a wild boar's head,

stuffed and mounted above the sofa. The Judge settled down to study the photographs. Two men shouldering a canoe. Sports Day. A child dwarfed by his safety helmet, winning the cycle race. A woman on a driveway lifting a tiny toy dog towards the camera. No family pets had been left locked in the chalet. Where were the animals? The Judge got up, still carrying the photographs, and went through to look over the kitchen floor: no bowls, no rugs, no basket, no cat flap. She shrugged and continued peering into these lost lives. Tropics. Very possibly Martinique, all the signs are in French. Here is a black man on a beach carrying a calabash. The images were of family, anniversaries, holidays, moments of success. But who takes pictures of their loved ones at nine-thirty on a November night, sunk into the sofa in front of the television? Here were life's landmarks: the weddings, birthdays, sports day, the new baby in her grandmother's arms. And surely this was Madame Laval, swinging on a ski lift, beside one of the women who died in the forest, with another young girl clinging to her arm, smiling – the same smile. This is her daughter.

'What's Laval's daughter called? Laval's a widow, isn't she?' Schweigen consulted a printout, the Judge recited the names.

'Un fils, Paul, né le 15 octobre 1971, et une fille, Marie-Thérèse, née le 2 novembre 1983. We never interrogated either of them after the Swiss departure. They weren't there. The boy was still at university in Paris and the girl was too young.'

She reached down into the mass of salvaged Christmas paper and handed him a small crushed heap of green-and-white stripes, holding out the matching card beneath the light. He studied the curling script. *To my darling Marie-T, Je t'aime, ma petite chérie, Bisous, Maman.*

'Find that girl for me, André. No one else in last night's departure is called Marie-T. And this present, whatever it was, has been opened.'

She measured the size of the wrapping paper and noted the pattern of the first folds. Schweigen turned the card round in his hand.

'Yes, but do the two go together? This paper and this card? The card's not attached to anything and the DVDs were wrapped in the same paper.'

'We must check.'

Schweigen strode outside to use the radio car. The Judge laid out a newspaper flat upon the table and emptied the contents of every single waste-paper basket that could be found, downstairs and upstairs, on to the table. She began to examine the scrabbled pile of objects in turn, raising each strange scrap into the air, tissues, used biros, the last cylinder from a lavatory roll, discarded plastic bags, an empty can of Coca-Cola Light, a broken stapler and an exploded balloon. She gazed at each pointless, redundant item with an intense and tender concentration. The forensic team tiptoed around her; a small cloud of her warm breath billowed into the cold.

★ ★ ★

The forensic pathologist from the university hospital lab rang Schweigen at 1 a.m. Everyone looked up expectantly. He stood in front of the charred logs left in the massive fireplace, black volcanic stone, with a huge slab of dark slate beneath the irons, and simply listened. The team lost interest and continued their travail de fourmi, the ant-like crawl, turning over all the daily objects, touched by the dead. Schweigen's team was known for its thoroughness; one of them dusted off the plastic fridge magnets, in case they revealed a different set of prints, and photographed the cheery plastic alphabet, arranged into insane, compelling poetry.

'Well?' The Judge glowered at him. Schweigen consulted his notes.

'Exactly the same pattern as the Swiss departure. He won't say anything definite. You know what he's like. And he's being very cagy about the exact time of death. Apparently he's got to measure the potassium content of the fluid in the eye. All the bodies were as cold as the ground beneath them. But here's the basics: apart from Laval, who was shot, and we don't yet have the ballistics report, they all died of potassium cyanide poisoning, except for the children, who seem to have been dosed with a mild form of chloroform, then injected with sodium thiopentone. But he's only examined two of

them so far. We've sent down the syringes we found in the bathroom. The old lady was diabetic and he thinks they're hers. It looks as if they murdered their children while they slept and then carried them up the mountain.'

'No.' The Judge contradicted him. 'They wouldn't have done that. They would have knocked them out down here and then killed them on the spot. How many of your people are still up there?'

'About five. I can't get a signal from their mobiles.'

A young woman in a white plastic overall and red scarf stepped up to the Judge.

'I'll go up. We're now looking for one or more disposable syringes in the clearing. Right?'

The Judge inspected the unlined face before her. Surely this girl was too young to be staring at these monstrous deaths?

'Yes. That's right. Off you go. Take this torch.' The Judge got up, stretched her arms over her head and then accompanied the girl to the door. The frost had now hardened the earth into a sparkling crust that glinted in evil buckled sheets across the muddied tracks and spattered snow.

'Will you be OK?'

The girl smiled. 'I'm not afraid of dead people and I don't believe in ghosts.'

The Judge grinned back, a warm merry smile, which the young forensic technician had never seen before; the Judge never looked young, or mischievous, and they were all terrified of her famous Medusa glare.

'Quite right,' said the Judge, 'neither am I. Hot coffee when you come back down. André!' She called back into the arctic chalet. 'If you've finished in the boiler room and this place is not wired to blow up, let's turn the central heating back on.'

## BY THE SAME AUTHOR

*Fiction*

Hallucinating Foucault
Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees
James Miranda Barry
The Deadly Space Between
Seven Tales of Sex and Death
Miss Webster and Chérif

*Criticism*

Sisters and Strangers
Writing on the Wall: Selected Essays

*Edited*

In and Out of Time
Cancer through the Eyes of Ten Women (with Vicky Wilson)
The Woman who Loved Cucumbers (with Janet Thomas)
Mirror, Mirror (with Janet Thomas)
Safe World Gone (with Janet Thomas)

## A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

Patricia Duncker is the author of four novels, *Hallucinating Foucault* (1996), winner of the McKitterick Prize and the Dillons First Fiction Award, *James Miranda Barry* (1999) and *The Deadly Space Between* (2002). Her fourth novel, *Miss Webster and Chérif* (2006), was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Writers Prize, 2007. She has published two collections of short fiction, *Monsieur Shoushana's Lemon Trees* (1997), shortlisted for the Macmillan Silver Pen Award, and *Seven Tales of Sex and Death* (2003), all of which have been widely translated. She is Professor of Contemporary Literature at the University of Manchester.

First published in Great Britain 2010
This paperback edition published 2011



Bloomsbury Publishing, London, Berlin, New York and Sydney

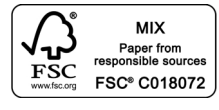
36 Soho Square, London W1D 3QY

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978 1 4088 0956 3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

Typeset by Hewer Text UK Ltd, Edinburgh
Printed in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, St Ives plc




www.bloomsbury.com/patriciaduncker