

‘Masterly.’ — *Le Figaro*



THE  
GODMOTHER

HANNELORE CAYRE

The French bestseller *La Daronne*  
Winner of the European Crime Fiction Prize  
and the Grand Prix de Littérature Policière

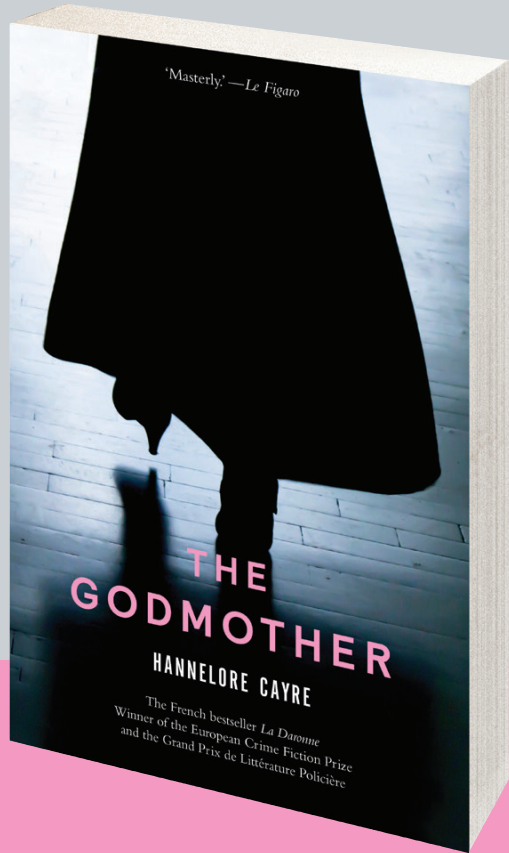
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# THE GODMOTHER

## HANNELORE CAYRE

Translated by Stephanie Smee  
from the French bestseller, *La Daronne*.

International release of the  
film adaptation starring  
Isabelle Huppert in 2019



HANNELORE CAYRE is an award-winning French novelist, screenwriter and director, and a practising criminal lawyer at the French Court of Appeal.

# 1

## Money is the end game

My fraudster parents had a visceral love of money. They loved it, not like you love an inert object stashed away in a suitcase or held in some account. No. They loved it like a living, intelligent being that can create and kill, that is endowed with the capacity to reproduce. Like something formidable that forges destinies. That distinguishes beauty from ugliness, winners from losers. Money is the *Endgame*; the distillation of all that can be bought in a world where everything is for sale. It is the answer to every question. It is the pre-Babel language that unites mankind.

They had lost everything, it must be said, including their country. There was nothing left of my father's French Tunisia, nothing of my mother's Jewish Vienna. Nobody to speak his *patouète* dialect, nor her Yiddish. Not even the dead in a cemetery. Nothing. Erased from the map, like Atlantis. And so they bonded in their solitude and put down their roots in the interstitial space between a motorway and a forest where they would build the house in which I was raised, known ostentatiously as *The Estate*. A name which conferred the inviolable and sacred trappings of the Law on that sinister scrap of earth; a sort of constitutional reassurance that never again would they be booted away from anywhere. Their Israel.

My parents were wogs, ostentatious foreigners, outsiders. *Raus. Nothing but the shirt on their back.* Like all those of their sort,

they hadn't had much choice. Fall on any money they could, accept whatever working conditions came their way, or engage in some serious wheeling and dealing, relying on a community of like-minded people; they didn't stop long to think about it.

My father was the chairman and managing director of a trucking company that traded under the name *Mondiale*, its slogan *All things to all places*. "Chairman and managing director", words not used anymore to describe a job, as in *What does your dad do? – He's the chairman and managing director ...* but in the '70s, it was a thing. It went with duck à l'orange, yellow polyester roll-neck jumpers worn over mini culottes, and fixed-line telephone covers trimmed with braid.

He made his fortune sending his trucks to so-called shit-hole countries with names ending in *-an* like Pakistan, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, Iran, etc. In order to get a job with *Mondiale*, you first had to get out of prison because according to my father, only somebody who had been locked up for at least fifteen years could cope with staying stuck in the cab of his truck for thousands of kilometres and would defend his cargo with his life.

I can see myself still, as if it were yesterday, in a little navy blue velvet dress with my patent leather Froment-Leroyer shoes, standing around the Christmas tree, surrounded by scarred types clutching pretty little coloured parcels in their stranglers' hands. The administrative staff of *Mondiale* were of similar ilk. They consisted exclusively of pied-noirs, my father's French colonial compatriots, men as dishonest as they were ugly. Only Jacqueline, his personal assistant, succeeded in enhancing the tableau. With her large, teased-up chignon into which she would coquettishly pin a diadem, this daughter of a man condemned to death in the legal purges following France's Liberation had a flashy look about her that stemmed from her Vichy childhood.

This cheerful, unsavoury team in respect of whom my father exercised a romantic paternalism provided him with an impenetrable

cover to transport so-called *additional* cargo in his convoys. Which is how the haulage first of morphine base with his Corsican-pied noir mates, then weapons and ammunition made *Mondiale* rich, *Mondiale* along with its employees who were royally remunerated until the beginning of the '80s. Pakistan, Iran, Afghanistan, I'm not ashamed to say, my very own papa was the Marco Polo of the post-war Golden Age years, reopening the trade routes between Europe and the Middle East.

Any criticism of the construction and location of *The Estate* was seen by my parents as a symbolic attack, to the point where we never so much as alluded to the slightest negative aspect of its position, even amongst ourselves: not the deafening noise of the road which meant we had to shout to make ourselves heard, not the black, sticky dust which seeped its way into everything, not the house-rattling vibrations nor the extreme dangerousness of those six lanes which rendered a simple act like getting home without being rear-ended the work of miracles.

My mother would start to slow down three hundred metres before the gate, reaching the dip in the curb, hazard lights on, in a hail of horns. My father, on the rare occasion he was there, practised a form of vehicular terrorism as he braked, his V8 screaming as he decelerated from two hundred to ten clicks an hour in a matter of metres, forcing whoever had the misfortune of following him to swerve terrifyingly. As for me, nobody ever came to visit, evidently enough. Whenever a friend asked where I lived, I lied about my address. Nobody would have believed me anyway.

In my childish imagination, we were somehow different: we were *the People of the Road*.

Five different events, which took place over thirty years, came to confirm our singularity: in 1978, at number 27, a thirteen year old boy had massacred his two parents and his four brothers and sisters

in their sleep with a garden tool. When he was asked why, he replied that he'd needed a change. At number 47, in the '80s, there was the particularly sordid affair of the imprisonment of an old bloke who had been tortured by his family. Ten years later, at number 12, a marriage agency set up shop, which was in fact a prostitution network of Eastern European girls. At number 18, they found a mummified couple. And recently, at number 5, a jihadist weapons cache. It's all in the papers. None of that's made up.

Why did all these people choose to live right there?

For some of them, my parents included, the answer is simple: because money likes the shadows and there are more shadows than you can poke a stick at along the edge of a motorway. As for the others, it was the road that sent them mad.

We were a bit different, then, because if we were eating at the dinner table and we heard the screeching of tyres, mid-mouthful, we would stop talking. Then would come the extraordinary sound of crunching of scrap metal followed by a remarkable quiet, a sort of disciplined, self-imposed toll-taking adopted by drivers making their way past the jumble of flesh and chassis those people had become, people who, like themselves, had been on their way somewhere.

If it happened outside our place, around number 54, my mother would call the fire brigade, then we would leave our meal unfinished *to go to the accident*, as she used to say. We would bring out our folding chairs and meet the neighbours out there. On the weekend, it would usually happen around number 60 where the most popular nightclub in the area had set up, with its seven different dance zones. And nightclubs spell accidents. Lots of them. It's crazy how many dead drunk people manage to pile into a car only to die there, carrying away with them those happy families who've set off on their holidays in the middle of the night just so they could wake up at the seaside.

So, *the People of the Road* witnessed up close a considerable number of tragedies involving the young and the old, dogs, bits of brain and bits of belly ... and what always surprised me was never hearing the slightest cry from all those victims. Barely an *oh là là* muttered under the breath from those who managed to stagger along as far as us.

During the year, my parents would go to ground, like rats behind their four walls, devoting themselves to tax optimisation calculations that were as convoluted as they were avant-garde, closely monitoring the slightest external display of wealth in their way of life, thus luring away the Beast attracted by fatter prey.

But on holidays, once out of the French jurisdiction, we lived like multimillionaires alongside American movie stars in Swiss or Italian hotels in Bürgenstock, Zermatt or Ascona. Our Christmases were spent in the *Winter Palace* in Luxor or at the *Danieli* in Venice ... and there my mother came to life.

As soon as she arrived, she headed straight for the luxury boutiques to buy clothes, jewellery and perfume, while my father added to his collection of brown paper envelopes stuffed with cash. In the evenings, he would appear back at the front of the hotel in the white convertible Thunderbird which somehow managed to accompany us on our offshore peregrinations. Same for the Riva which would appear as if by magic on the waters of Lake Lucerne or the Grand Canal in Venice.

I still have lots of photos from these Fitzgeraldian holidays, but I think there are two that convey it all.

The first is of my mother in a dress with pink flowers, posing next to a sharp palm tree that cut the summer sky like a green spray. She's holding her hand up to shield her already weak eyes from the sunlight.

The other is a photo of me next to Audrey Hepburn. It was taken at the Belvedere on August 1st, Swiss National Day. I'm eating a huge strawberry melba ice cream drowning in Chantilly cream and syrup, and they're letting off a superb fireworks display

which is reflected in Lake Lucerne while my parents are up dancing to a Shirley Bassey song on the dance floor. I'm tanned and wearing a blue Liberty dress with smocking which brings out the *Patience-blue* of my eyes, as my father had taken to describing their colour.

It's a perfect moment. I radiate wellbeing like an atomic pile.

The actress must have sensed this immense happiness because quite spontaneously she sat down next to me to ask me what I wanted to be when I grew up.

'A fireworks collector.'

'A fireworks collector! But how are you planning on collecting something like that?'

'In my mind. I'm going to travel the world and see them everywhere.'

'Why, you're the first fireworks collector I've ever met! *Enchantée.*'

Then, she called one of her friends over to take a photograph so he could immortalise this unscripted moment. She had two copies printed. One for me and one for her. I lost mine and forgot it even existed but I happened to see hers again in an auction catalogue with the description: *The Little Fireworks Collector, 1972.*

That photo captured the promise of my former life: a life whose future was far more dazzling than all the time which has passed since that 1st August.

After spending the whole holidays haring around Switzerland to hunt down a suit or a handbag, my mother would spend the evening before our departure cutting off all the labels from the new clothes she had accumulated and decanting the content of her perfume bottles into shampoo bottles in case the customs inquisition asked us where the money had come from to buy all these new items.

And why was I called Patience?



*Because you were born at ten months, of course. Your father always told us that it was the snow that had stopped him getting the car out to come and see you after the birth, but the truth of the matter is, that after such a long wait, he was just incredibly disappointed to have a girl. And you were enormous . . . five kilos . . . a monster . . . and ugly . . . with half your head crushed by the forceps . . . When at last you were dragged out of my body, there was so much blood it looked like I'd just stepped on a mine. A total butcher shop! And all of that for what? For a girl! Such an injustice!*

I'm fifty-three years old. My hair is long and completely white. It turned white very young, like my father's. For a long time I dyed it, because I was ashamed, and then one day I was sick of watching my roots and I shaved my head to let it grow out. It appears to be all the rage now; in any event, it goes very well with my *Patience-blue* eyes and it clashes less and less with my wrinkles.

My mouth looks slightly lopsided when I speak, which means the right hand side of my face is a little less wrinkled than the left. It's due to a subtle hemiplegia caused by my initial crushing. And it means I look a bit working-class which, when added to my strange hairdo, is not uninteresting. I'm fairly solidly built carrying five kilos extra, after putting on thirty during each of my two pregnancies, when I gave free rein to my passion for large colourful cakes, fruit jellies and ice creams. At work, I wear monochrome suits – grey, black or anthracite – that are unaffectedly elegant.

I always make sure I'm well-groomed so my white hair doesn't make me look like some old beatnik. That's not to say I'm overly particular; at my age I tend to find that sort of affectation a bit sinister . . . No, I just want people to exclaim when they look at me: *Dear God, that woman's in good shape . . .* Hairdressers, manicurists, beauticians, hyaluronic acid fillers, intense pulsed light, well-cut clothes, good quality make-up, day and night creams, siestas . . . I've always had a Marxist view of beauty. For a long time, I could never

afford to be fresh and beautiful; now that I can, I'm catching up. Were you to see me now, on the balcony of my lovely hotel, you'd say I was the spitting image of Heidi on her mountain.

People say I'm bad-tempered, but I think that's a judgement made in haste. It's true, I'm easily annoyed by people because I find them slow and often uninteresting. For example, when people are taking forever to tell me something I usually couldn't care less about, I have a habit of looking at them impatiently which I find hard to hide, and that upsets them. So they think I'm being unpleasant. And as a result, I don't really have any friends; just acquaintances.

There is this; I suffer from a slight neurological peculiarity. My brain combines several of my senses which means I experience a different reality to other people's. For me, colours and shapes are linked to taste and to feelings of wellbeing or satiety. A sensorial experience which is quite strange and difficult to explain. The word is *ineffable*.

Some people see colours when they hear sounds, others associate numbers to shapes. Others again have a physical perception of time passing. Me? I taste and feel colours. However much I know that they're nothing more than a quantum conversation between matter and light, I can't stop myself feeling that they actually form part of the very body of things. For example, where others see a pink dress, I see it as pink matter, composed of little pink atoms, and when I'm looking at it, I lose myself in its infinite pinkness. Which gives me a sensation of wellbeing and warmth, and also gives me an uncontrollable desire to bring the dress in question to my mouth, because for me, the colour pink is also a taste. Like "the little patch of yellow wall" in Proust's *The Prisoner*, which so absorbs the character looking at Vermeer's *View of Delft*. I'm convinced the author must have caught the man who inspired his character of Bergotte in the act of licking the painting. Thinking that all too crazy and just a tiny bit disgusting, he didn't mention it in his novel.

As a child, I was always swallowing bits of paint from walls and plastic toys that were all one colour, narrowly escaping death on several occasions, until one doctor, who was more imaginative than the others, went further than a banal diagnosis of autism to discover I had a case of bimodal synaesthesia. This neurological particularity finally explained why, when I found myself faced with a plateful of mixed-up colours, I spent the meal sorting the contents, my face ravaged by tics.

He suggested to my parents that they let me eat what I wanted, if I found the food they were offering me aesthetically pleasing and it wasn't going to poison me: pastel-coloured candy, Sicilian cassata, profiteroles filled with pink and white cream, and ice cream stuffed with little pieces of rainbow-coloured candied fruit. It was he, too, who suggested to them the trick of having paint colour charts to leaf through and rings with big, colourful stones that I could gaze at for hours, chewing my cheek, my mind a total blank.

Which brings me to fireworks: when those sprays of incandescent chrysanthemums appear in the sky, I experience a coloured emotion that is so profoundly vivid it saturates me in joy and at the same time leaves me with a feeling of repleteness. Like an orgasm.

Collecting fireworks, well, that would feel like being in the middle of a gigantic gang bang with the entire universe.

And *Portefeux* ... that's my husband's name. The man who protected me for a while from the cruelty of the world and who offered me a life of delights and satisfied desires. For those marvellous years we were married, he loved me as I was, with my chromatic sexuality, my passion for Rothko, my lolly-pink dresses and my complete lack of practicality equalled only by my mother's.

We started our life off in superb apartments, rented with the fruit of his labour. I say *rented* quite deliberately – as in *creditor protected*, because like my father, my husband did business ... of the sort about which everybody was oblivious except insofar as it afforded us significant material comfort, and about which nobody

would ever have thought to interrogate him given how generous, how serious, how well-bred he was.

He, too, accumulated wealth thanks to so-called *shit-hole* countries by offering consulting services for the development of national wagering systems. In short, he sold his expertise in lotteries and the French state-controlled betting systems to the leaders of African countries or places in central Asia, like Azerbaijan or Uzbekistan. You can picture the scene. I, for one, was very familiar with that end-of-the-road ambiance, having holidayed numerous times in improbable hotels, both with him as well as my own family. They were the only places where the air-conditioning worked and the alcohol was decent. Where mercenaries rubbed shoulders with journalists, businessmen and criminals on the run. Where the reigning tranquil ennui in the bar lent itself to lazy chatter. Not that different, for those who know, to the cottonwool-like atmosphere of the common areas in psychiatric hospitals. Or indeed from the atmosphere in the spy novels of Gérard de Villiers.

We met in Muscat, in the sultanate of Oman, the same place he died when we were there celebrating our seven year wedding anniversary.

At breakfast, the morning after our first night together, he buttered my toast to look like my favourite painting, without even realising: a rectangle of bread with strawberry jam spread over half of it, then butter with nothing else on a quarter of the remaining surface and to finish off, some orange marmalade spread to the edge of the toast: *White Center (Yellow, Pink and Lavender on Rose)* by Rothko.

Superb, don't you think?

When I married him, I thought I would lead a carefree life of love forever. I could not have imagined life dishing me up anything as dreadful as an aneurism mid belly-laugh. Which is how he died, opposite me, at the age of thirty-four at the Grand Hyatt in Muscat.

When I saw him fall head first into his plate of salad I felt an

indescribable pain. As if an apple-corer had plunged into the centre of my body and extracted my spirit, whole. I would have liked to have run away or sink into the torpor of a merciful faint, but no, I remained stuck there, in my chair, my fork mid-air, surrounded by people continuing to quietly eat their meal.

At that very moment . . . no, not a second earlier, at precisely that moment, my life turned to shit.

Things got off to a great start with hours spent waiting in an unlikely police station, ringed by suitcases and with two little girls going crazy in the heat, under the blatant, arrogant stares of the Sultanate's police officers. I still have nightmares about it: me, clutching my passport, doing my best to calm my two girls who are dying of thirst, answering humiliating comments with a feeble smile, comments I'm not supposed to understand. Me, the one who speaks Arabic.

As it was too complicated to repatriate my husband's body, a scornful functionary ended up giving me permission to bury him at *Petroleum Cemetery*, the only place that would accept *kafirs*, while simultaneously debiting an exorbitant amount from my credit card.

That's how you find yourself at twenty-seven with a newborn and a two-year old, alone, with no income, no roof over your head because it didn't take more than a month for us to be thrown out of our beautiful apartment on the Rue Raynouard with its view over the Seine, and for our handsome furniture to be sold. As for our Mercedes with the leather interior . . . the old hunchbacked eroto-maniac with the string of convictions who had been my husband's driver, just took off with it, leaving me and my girls stranded outside the lawyer's office.

In the face of all that, it wasn't long before I came crashing down. I already had a tendency to talk constantly to myself and to eat flowers, but one afternoon, I was walking out of the Céline boutique on Rue Françoise Ist as if I were sleepwalking, dressed head to toe in new clothes, muttering to nobody in particular, *bye, I'll pay later!*,

when two poor security types, all in black, with ear pieces, fell on me before I reached the door. I lashed out at them and bit them, drawing blood, and was taken straight to the madhouse.

I spent eight months with the lunatics, contemplating my previous life, much like a shipwreck survivor keeps watching the sea, waiting for somebody to come to the rescue. I was being told to kiss it all goodbye, as if I were suffering some sort of sickness I had to be cured of at any cost, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it.

My two little girls, too young to have the slightest memory of their fabulous father, forced me to face my new life. Did I really have any choice? I counted the days, then the months that had passed since my husband's death, and then one day, without even noticing, I stopped counting.

I was a new woman, mature, sad, and determined. An incomplete creature, an odd sock: the widow Portefeux!

I separated myself from the remains of my past ... from my enormous Paraiba tourmaline cabochon, my pink Padparadscha sapphire, my fancy blue and pink diamond *toi et moi* ring and my fire opal ... all the colours that had accompanied me from childhood ... I sold it all so I could buy myself a dreary little three-roomer in Paris-Belleville with a view onto a courtyard giving onto another courtyard. A dump where night rules the day and colours don't exist. The building itself was in keeping; an old community housing block in red brick from the '20s with bad finishes, increasingly overrun by Chinese who screamed at each other all day, yelling from one floor to the next.

And then, I got down to work ... Ah, yes, work ... Personally, I had no idea what it involved before being written out of the generic *Yours truly* script by some malevolent entity ... And since I had nothing else to offer the world apart from an expertise in every kind of fraud, and a doctorate in Arabic, I became a court interpreter and translator.

After such a come-down in the financial department, I had little choice but to raise my daughters in an environment of hysterical fear of a drop in social status. I paid too much for schools, shouted at them when they got bad marks, put a hole in their jeans or had greasy hair. I am not ashamed to admit, I was an irritable mother, not the slightest bit pleasant.

Having done brilliantly in their studies, my two erudite girls are currently working in the services sector. I've never really understood what their jobs entail; they've tried to explain it to me again and again, but I have to say I tune out before I understand. Let's just say we're talking about those dumbass jobs where you fade away in front of some computer screen making things that don't really exist and that bring no added value to the world. As for their professional career, it's just like the words in the song: *No one's gonna find fixed work / even with straight As, you're gonna have to fight / my pizza delivery guy knows how to fix a satellite!*

Regardless, I'm proud of them, and if they were ever hungry, I would cut off both arms to feed them. That said, though, let's be frank, we don't have much to say to each other. So, I'm not going to say any more, except to declare, out loud and proud, that I love them, those girls of mine. They're magnificent, decent, and they've always accepted things without batting an eyelid. I guess, then, the family line of adventurers stopped with me; it was never really my thing.

The auctioneer to whom all my rings had been dispersed on my leaving the madhouse – *sale of the contents of Madame P.'s jewellery case, a discerning collector* – continued to send me his catalogues filled with jewels and magnificent objects, thinking, no doubt that I was some very wealthy individual.

When everybody was asleep at night and the house was finally silent (I used to sleep on the sofa bed in the living room), I would sit down at my desk with a glass of Guignolet Kirsch. Then I would religiously leaf through the glamorous brochures, reading each

description, looking at every photograph and I would play at *imagine everything goes up in smoke and you put in a fraudulent insurance claim and get a fat cheque*. I just adore old things; they've witnessed the lives of so many people and you never get tired of looking at them, as you do new things.

It's little details like this which make me realise now that despite my profound sadness, I've always been open to positive ideas. To feel so desperate as to contemplate suicide, you have to have a strength of spirit I've never had.

In short, more than twenty years after having scattered all I held dear to the winds, I stumbled by chance across the photo of *The Little Fireworks Collector*, valued between ten and fifteen thousand euros.

Obviously, I wanted to buy it back.

When the day arrived and I turned up at Artcurial auctioneers at the end of the Champs-Élysées, I was scared to death ... scared I'd miss the print ... scared the price would soar out of my reach ... scared of all those well-dressed people having fun with their money ... scared of being caught out like some pretender in my pathetic little chalk-coloured suit, with an expression to match.

I hung back until it came to my lot. It was an original colour print of the Belvedere terrace, 50cm x 40cm. The look and feel of the fit-out was typical of the seventies: stone, glass and blonde wood furniture. In the background, you could see a firework about to explode because the sky was a deep blue. Audrey Hepburn was wearing a magnolia-pink Givenchy dress. Her face was right up next to mine and in the foreground, in pride of place, sat my strawberry Melba ice cream. Everything was exactly in its place; the absolute perfection of a moment fixed in time forever.

Lot 240, an unpublished and unique shot by Julius Shulmann in a break from his usual Californian villas ... *The Little Fireworks Collector*, 1972. This is an original print offered to the actress and not catalogued in the Paul Getty collection. Everybody will have



recognised Audrey Hepburn next to that pretty little blonde girl with the blue eyes, standing in front of her beautiful ice cream. I have 10,000 euros ... 11,000, 11,500, 12,000, 13,000s ...

I panicked ... I felt like screaming ... *Stop, that little girl with the golden skin, that's me!... Look at me, look what I've become ... Can I not at least be allowed this,...*

At 14,500, it stalled ... once, twice ... 15,000, I cried ... 15,000 at the back of the room ... and the person bidding me up, a guy who looked young enough to be my son, gestured he was done...

With the fees, I got it for 19,000 euros. Me, the little court translator, who used to pride herself on never using credit, I'd cracked for a photo.

I went home with my treasure and hung it up opposite my desk. My daughters simply couldn't understand what had gotten into me to buy this portrait of the cheerful little blonde girl to decorate the living room all of a sudden, when the rest of our apartment, apart from its pink carpet with orange flowers, had always been so hideously grim ... Worse, if I had told them I had indebted myself for the next five years, they would have thought I'd gone mad. They did not, for one second, make the connection with their mother.

How sad is that.

I started working as an interpreter in courts hearing summary trials.

You should have seen me when I started, I put such heart into my work. I thought I was indispensable and enthusiastically translated nuance and register, everything the defendants wanted to express to those judging them. I should say I felt infinitely sorry for many of the Arabs whose words I reproduced in these trials for chicken theft. Men who were extraordinarily poor, with little education; poor migrants looking for an El Dorado that doesn't exist, forced into some petty skulduggery, some pathetic theft, so as not to die of hunger.

But it didn't take long for me to realise that nobody was interested in my nuance or my register, the interpreter was just a tool to accelerate the act of repression. You only have to see how the magistrates speak during these hearings, their delivery not varying one iota regardless of whether the interpreter is keeping up or not, whether the guy in the box is following or not.

I was considered an evil rendered necessary by human rights. Nothing more. I was addressed with barely a grudging acknowledgment: *Is the interpreter here? Yes, good, then we can start. You're charged with having committed in Paris and, in any event, within the relevant statutory limitation period ... blah ... blah ... blah ...* and so on, without drawing breath, for the next ten minutes.

There was something particularly moving about seeing my colleagues working in sign language who acted like derailed robots in order to translate one per cent of what they managed to grasp on the fly. But when one of us was impertinent enough to ask for a pause to make ourselves understood by the poor wretch for whom we were responsible, who wasn't picking up a damned thing, the magistrate would adopt a look of sufferance and close his eyes as if to say *I'm just going to hum a little tune in my head while I wait for this moment to pass*. Evidently, the irritating person in question would be noted as a nit-picker and never called back.

I very quickly stopped trying.

When I felt for my guy, I sometimes managed to slip in a few words in Arabic amidst the torrent of words coming from the judge, along the lines: *Just tell these ass-holes what they want to hear so we can be done with this: you were in such a hurry to leave that you stole so you could buy your return ticket*.

For the more complicated files with several charges, when I had phone intercepts to translate, I sometimes even completely invented things to defend the ones in the group whom I thought were most pitiful. But I could also do the reverse and decide to sink them, especially when it was a matter of defending their poor wives. Naïve

girls who were totally under their thumb. As the prostitutes or mistresses stacked up, these bastard husbands, whose filthy intimacy I shared through my headphones, treated them like dogs, and underlined the cynicism of the exercise by putting their business mobile phone lines, their go-fast cars and the property which was a product of their money-laundering in their wives' names. I made sure to tell *them* what I had heard over the wire taps. Told them what stupid idiots they were being, just so they would stop showing up at the visitors' room twice a week like mules loaded up with bags of dirty linen.

Except, I was paid under the table by the department that employed me and thus declared no income.

True karma, indeed.

What's more, it's pretty frightening when you think about it, that the translators upon whom the security of the nation rests, those very people simultaneously translating the conspiracies instigated by Islamists in their cellars or garages, are working illegally, with no social security, no superannuation. Frankly, you could do better, couldn't you, in terms of incorruptibility.

Well, I find it pretty disturbing, and that's coming from me, and I've been corrupted.

At first, I found it pretty funny and then one day, I wasn't laughing any more.

I was helping a poor Algerian in a compensation claim for wrongful detention. It's a matter heard in the civil jurisdiction where they argue about the amount of damages the State has to pay an innocent person for having ruined his life. On this particular day, the parade of legal errors was being played out before an especially loathsome magistrate who eyed each claimant with a mocking sneer, as if to say *You, innocent? And what else am I supposed to believe...*

The Arab in question, a labourer who had been cleaning the

façade of a building where some crazy woman was living, had done two and a half years of a custodial sentence for a rape he hadn't committed before being acquitted by the Assize Court when the madwoman retracted.

He kept on at me for the whole hour before the hearing, trying to explain to me how much the occasion meant to him, thinking that here, at last, was a chance to pour out everything he had pent up inside: the promiscuity rife in the prison, the treatment reserved for sex offenders like him by his fellow inmates, the two showers a week, his wife who had returned home to the village with his children, his family who didn't speak to him anymore, the flat he'd lost . . . He had so much to say. The court could have taken five minutes to listen to him, if only to apologise for the fact that some judge at first instance had totally fucked up his life by remanding him in custody for thirty months without any evidence. Well, no, the chief justice cut him off contemptuously: *Monsieur, at the time you were working without any papers. You have no grounds upon which to make any claim whatsoever. As far as we are concerned, you don't even exist!*

I was so utterly ashamed I could no longer find the words in Arabic. I couldn't even look him in the eye. I started babbling something and then it just came out, all on its own: *Your Honour, I, too, am working without any documentation, and for the Department of Justice no less. So, since I don't exist, see how you manage without me!* And I left, leaving them all to it.

Despite my disenchantment, I made dazzling progress on the career front. My colleagues will say I must have slept with a lot of people to have had such a run. The comments that made it back to me were more vulgar still; there must have been kilometres of cops' dicks involved, etc., etc.

There might have been some truth in it, insofar as it's the police from the various departments who decide which interpreter will be called to translate the wire taps or interviews of those in police custody in their cases. That's why you see all sorts in this job, because

in order to get started as a translator, all you have to do is *swear solemnly and sincerely to assist in the exercise of justice* ... Now, you've got to realise that lots of French interpreters of North African origin only know their parents' dialect, whereas there are seventeen different Arabic dialects that are as far removed from each other as French is from German. It's impossible to know all of them if you haven't studied Arabic seriously at university level. In other words, if you're looking at the wire taps of a Syrian or a Libyan which have been translated by, say, a Moroccan model, or by a cop's Tunisian wife or by a police superintendent's Algerian sports trainer ... how should I say this, ... I'm not judging ... but I'd like to see them.

I think I owe my success to my availability, but above all else, to my name, Patience Portefeux. Especially since the attacks, now that every Arab is seen as a potential terrorist. *Quis custodiet ipsos custodios?* Who will guard the guardians? Who will listen to the Arab translators? Ah, ah, ah ... nobody! You can only pray they remain deaf to the discourteous comments which they and their children are forced to suffer. A racist, paranoid society forced to trust its foreigners, it's a farce!

They used to call me all the time to give me work and I have to say, in almost twenty-five years I never turned down the smallest job, even if I was sick. Then suddenly, with the respect earned by my reliability, they only offered me the jobs I wanted, leaving the rest to less experienced translators.

That's how, little by little, I was able to steer clear of interpreting in court and during prisoner interrogations and concentrate instead on wire taps for the drug squad and organised crime investigations. And so I avoided having to keep company with everybody wanting to tell me all about their trials and tribulations, them in their handcuffs, and me the first and only person in the assembly line of repression to speak their language, because contrary to the leftist paternalistic bourgeoisie, I've never felt the need to devote any time

to respectable Arabs in order to justify my existence. There are all sorts, just like there are all sorts the world over. Respectable types just as there are disgusting pigs. Progressive sorts, just as there are backward hicks from the village. People who are lost and isolated as well as whole villages who send their young people off to commit offences and bring money back home. There are all sorts.

At one point, I even tried my hand at terrorism, but that gave me such nightmares I stopped immediately. It must be said, the older I get, the less violence I can tolerate ... the beatings by the cops right under my nose as if I didn't even exist ... the spitting in the face coupled with insults along the lines ... *you filthy whore of a traitor* or *you harki bitch* ... the violent arrests where they stuck me in the front line outside the door without so much as a bullet-proof vest so I could shout in Arabic: *Police, open up* ...

At some point, I'd had enough of it all.

I had mainly been translating wire taps for the drug squad in their premises at 36 Quai des Orfèvres for the Central Bureau for Illicit Drug Traffic Control in Nanterre, or for the Directorate of Judicial Police, Second District. But with progress in digital technology and because I'm Patience Portefeux, the-French-woman-who-speaks-Arabic, that is, a woman above suspicion, I was allowed to retreat to my own home and work on audio files in front of my computer. So, when my mother had her stroke and my daughters judiciously fled my cantankerous presence to go and live in a share-house, I shut myself away like a hikikomori.

It was about that time that I threw myself into translating the inept conversations of drug traffickers by the kilometre ... in order to pay the 3,200 euros a month I was being charged by the aged care facility where I'd had to put my mother. Because translation pays when you work like a dog – 42 euros for the first hour, then 30 euros every subsequent hour, and when you calculate the number of hours yourself, you quickly get to quite a tidy sum ... But you end up with a head ready to explode ... Exploding with horror

stories often, because it's the interpreters who filter out the baseness of human nature before the police and judges have to confront it.

I'm thinking, in particular, of the death agonies recorded on mobile phone that I had the opportunity to listen to in the context of a case involving a settlement of accounts. Did anybody rush me off to a psychologist to be handled in kid gloves? And yet it was truly awful.

*Asba Patience – fuck – just do the translation, and hurry up about it...*

One of the many reasons I couldn't give a shit about any of them.

I mostly hang out with cops in my work. Lots of them are just like they are in the movies: always really angry because they're never able to get on top of anything, anywhere. Guys with deplorable domestic hygiene whose female companions have taken off a long time ago and whose evenings, if they're not spent wiping their own arses, end up in lousy screws with sad, forlorn women. I've always kept them at a distance by insisting on being known as the widow Portefeux, as the law entitles me to do. It takes people by surprise, it's true, but it does command respect.

Because I'm not some sad, forlorn woman; I'm a widow.

I owed my working conditions to a divorced cop by the name of Philippe, who lived with his son. I met him next door to the Nanterre Drug Squad Bureau one day when I'd been called in as reinforcement. It was at a supermarket check-out, to be precise, when he was buying hotdogs in plastic packages. I'm not at all the sort of woman who flirts but that made me laugh, seeing those sausages stuck into their little pre-cut rolls. I hadn't been able to stop myself making a comment along the lines of *excuse me, but I've always wondered who could possibly buy those things?* ... *A single cop*, came his answer, smiling, and we had a laugh ... then we slept together.

I didn't have him to thank for being constantly in demand, but I did owe it to him that I was paid by the hour and was trusted to be able to translate from home.

He was only ever good to me. And I behaved very badly towards him, but it has to be said, his unfailing honesty ended up being one hell of a drag.



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Traffickers, dealers, terrorists, politicians and more, *The Godmother* is a taut and darkly funny account of an unusual woman and her voyage into the underground ecosystem of crime and justice in contemporary France.

Meet Patience Portefeux, fifty-three, an underpaid Franco–Arab judicial interpreter for the Ministry of Justice who specialises in telephone tapping. Widowed after the sudden death of her husband, Patience has laboured for twenty-five years to keep everyone’s heads above water. She’s sandwiched between the university fees for her two grown-up daughters and nursing home costs for her ageing mother.

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