

## The Front Seat Passenger



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| Original title | <b>La Place du mort</b>                          |
| Author         | <b>Pascal Garnier</b>                            |
| Nationality    | <b>French</b>                                    |
| Pages          | <b>160</b>                                       |
| Editeur        | <b>© Éditions Zulma, 2011</b>                    |
| Period         | <b>Contemporary</b>                              |
| Settings       | <b>Urban / countryside / some seaside scenes</b> |
| Genre          | <b>Black humor / drama / social comedy</b>       |

**PITCH:**

When Fabien Delorme learns of his wife's death in a road accident, he discovers the existence of her lover, killed at the same time. Widowed and betrayed, his uneventful life is turned upside down. Fabien plots revenge, seducing the lover's wife. But an unforeseen train of events leads to his own miraculous escape from the clutches of death.

**PLOT:**

Fabien Delorme leads an ordinary life until his wife is killed in a car crash, together with her (previously unsuspected) lover. Fabien's best friend Gilles helps pick up the pieces, but Fabien is a man obsessed: 'that man stole my wife, I'm going to steal his.' The quest fills Fabien's every waking moment: he will take the dead man's place in the life of his widow, Martine Arnoult. Watching, waiting, a plan takes shape... When Martine takes a holiday, Fabien follows, seizing the opportunity to make her acquaintance. But Martine is clearly not playing the forlorn widow. Inseparable from her friend Madeleine, she seems oddly unaffected by her husband's death. In fact, the two women are bound for life and unto death by a curious secret: Madeleine was the dead man's first wife. And Martine stole him. Since when, a relentless struggle for supremacy has formed the bedrock of their relationship. Thanks to the accident that cost her first husband his life, Madeleine believes she has the upper hand. First and foremost because the catastrophe was her doing. And second because she has confessed the deed to Martine. Don't get mad, get even... Hence Madeleine's considerable irritation, when Fabien enters their lives during a holiday at the seaside. Back at home, she invites Martine and Fabien to her weekend place in the country. Where better to take Fabien out of the picture altogether and re-establish the status quo? But things don't go as planned: quite out of character, Martine's mind is made up, and it is she who fires the fatal bullet, shooting Madeleine in the head. Fabien's world implodes: his hoped-for new life with Martine, and her best friend, becomes a solitary hell. Shot and wounded at the remote country house, he finds himself a prisoner. Martine is a cold-blooded killer who will stop at nothing to manufacture her perfect new life. Gilles comes to the rescue, but neither he, nor a couple caught up along the way, get out alive. In a final, desperate bid to live, Fabien escapes Martine's clutches and takes refuge with his elderly father. Under questioning by the police, he quickly relents, and delivers Martine into the hands of the law.

## THEMES

Revenge / a struggle to the death between two women: *The Front Seat Passenger* is above all the story of a struggle between two female killers, Martine and Madeleine. They started out as friends, but became rivals: Madeleine introduced her husband to Martine, the two became lovers, and finally husband and wife. Curiously, the friendship between the two women appears unaffected: Madeleine sees it as a way to assuage her dark hatred of her ex-husband. 'Martine had served to give new vigour to a hatred that was dying down, and which they could not live without. She had let herself be manipulated by both of them because she didn't know how else to live, than to let others act for her.' But one day, the fragile balance is disrupted: Madeleine discovers her ex-husband Martial with a new lover (Fabien's wife), and kills them both. She confesses what she has done to Martine, taking advantage of the new situation to tighten her stranglehold on Martine's life, until Fabien's inconvenient arrival sparks new tension between the 'best enemies'. When Fabien's true identity is discovered, Martine must choose between her lover and her friend... and Madeleine is eliminated. Fabien finds himself hostage to a woman who has decided to take back control of her own life.

Lives transformed: Fabien is the average loser—a man without ambition, whose wife is cheating on him. An unexpected event—his wife's death, and the simultaneous discovery of her affair—sparks an appalling train of events. Flipped like a pinball between the vengeful passions of Martine and Madeleine, Fabien loses all control, before making a final, desperate bid to survive. With consummate skill, Pascal Garnier turns an ordinary life on its head: a dull existence is transformed into a bizarre, 'absurd' adventure. Fabien emerges as a fascinating, thoroughly likeable character, caught up in the terrifying rivalries of two women who will stop at nothing to achieve their aims.

Black humor: *Front Seat Passenger* is a dramatic, tragic tale, littered with bodies. But it's a story full of humor, too. The main characters (two cold-blooded killers and a dull 'everyman' loser) come from very different, seemingly incompatible worlds. But their improbable juxtaposition gives the story its distinctive spice, with a rich vein of humor that Garnier exploits to the full. Garnier offers a perfectly-judged mix of genres and a delightfully off-beat, 'screwball' atmosphere, at once comic and disturbing, similar in many ways to the films of the Coen brothers.

Social comedy: *Front Seat Passenger* is not least a comedy of manners. The narrative thread weaves numerous strands—adulterous affairs, revenge plots, tables turned—each ripe for development from a variety of perspectives, encompassing a broad range of social milieux (the upper middle-class patriciate, bourgeois metro-bohemians, everyday working folk), and applicable to numerous contexts worldwide.

# **DETAILED SYNOPSIS**

Saturday night, on a narrow country road leading up a hill. A large grey saloon car is stationed at the bottom, with its lights out. The car's engine springs to life when the lights of another vehicle are seen approaching over the top. Still in darkness, the grey saloon leaps forward just as the other car approaches. The second car swerves violently, plummeting into the roadside ditch.

Several hundred kilometers away, Fabien Delorme—married, forty-something, no kids—eats Sunday lunch alone with his ageing father. Neither is exactly a scintillating conversationalist, but today, the silence is heavier than ever. Fabien's mother Charlotte has just passed away. She left home thirty-five years ago, with not a word to her husband or son, and her death has awakened painful memories. The silence is louder still. The lunch seems endless, the dark house closes in around Fabien as he watches and waits for the moment when he can get back to the station and take the train home.

He enters to an empty apartment. No note on the table. Sylvie, his wife, must have gone out to the cinema with a friend. Just as well: Fabien wants to be alone with his gloomy thoughts. The voicemail flashes several messages, but he hasn't the heart to listen. The evening stretches out. He remembers his first years with Sylvie, their mutual passion, and what's left of it now... Bugged by the flashing light, he decides to listen to the messages. There are three. The first is from Gilles, his best friend. Recently separated from his wife, Gilles is wallowing in self-pity and single-hood. He's looking for news, an outing. The second, left the previous night, is from Laure, his wife's best friend, suggesting a movie. The third was left earlier that day: a hospital in a provincial town, some distance away. 'Your wife has been in a serious road accident. The number to contact us on is...' Fabien plays the recorded message three times over, in shock. One thing is certain: this evening, he has become a widower...

Next day, still numb from the shock, Fabien takes the train to identify Sylvie's body. What was she doing so far away? How had she died? A police inspector gives him the details: Sylvie was spending the weekend with her lover, who died alongside her in the accident. First a widower, and now cheated on by his wife. The inspector asks if he has any questions. Fabien has just one: his wife's lover's name. Reading the officer's scribbled notes upside down tells him what he needs to know: Martial Arnoult. Survived by his wife Martine, Martial lived in the same city as Fabien, at no. 45 rue Charlot.

Widowed, and cheated on. A double shock. Gilles and Laure decide Fabien will go to pieces if he stays home alone. He winds up at his old friend's place. While he was still married, Gilles' apartment had been a cosy nest, tastefully decorated, but there's little of that left now: a battered sofa, a TV, a round table and three chairs, toys strewn everywhere, the remnants of a visit from his son Leo.

A joint or two later, and Fabien finds the decor reassuringly comfortable. But alone, invariably, his thoughts turn to Martial Arnoult and his widow Martine, whose address he has noted. Gradually, insidiously, his thoughts turn to obsession. Before long, his new purpose in life is summed up in a single phrase: 'That man stole my wife, I'm going to steal his.'

The story takes a new turn. Fabien comes out of his shell and takes the initiative, for once in his life. Plotting his revenge, he determines to get to know Martine Arnoult. He discovers she is constantly in the company of an older friend, Madeleine, fifty, dynamic, tall and striking. Soon, observing the two women at a distance is no longer enough: Fabien wants to talk to Martine. One day, seeing them both emerge from a travel agency, he walks in after them and orders '...the same as those two ladies.' A group holiday in a seaside Club hotel. Fabien will get to know Martine, for sure.

Fabien dislikes the sun, and the sea. Gilles is somewhat surprised by his choice of holiday destination, but delighted to see his friend recovering his spirits.

At the seaside, it takes Fabien a day or two to venture onto the beach. He hates sand almost as much as water. He swims a few meters, trying to cool down, but finds himself further out than he realises, and suffers an attack of cramp. He is rescued by a pedalo. A hand reaches down to help. At the other end of the arm, Martine is staring anxiously into the water. The perfect introduction.

Fabien sticks to Martine and Madeleine like a limpet for the rest of the holiday: cultural outings, shopping, dinner... the works. The situation is easy enough to read, at first glance: Martine doesn't have a lot to say for herself, while Madeleine talks, asks the questions and decides for both of them. Fortune smiles on Fabien when Madeleine sprains her ankle and is confined to her room: left to accompany the shy Martine, he turns on the seductive charm.

Martine confides a strange secret to Fabien: she first met Madeleine at a narcotics support group. The two became friends, Martine met Martial, (Madeleine's husband at the time) and became his mistress. Later, she became his wife. Curiously, the two women remained friends; Madeleine reserved the full force of her hatred for Martial alone. Since his death, the two women have been inseparable.

By the end of the holiday, Fabien knows two things. First, the sweet, gentle Martine likes him (they have spent a night together, and she has given him her address and number). And second, Madeleine detests him. She's suspicious, and tells him so.

Fabien returns from holiday to find Gilles' apartment spotlessly clean and neat. Gilles' wife is back, and the two have resumed their disconcertingly quiet, well-ordered married life. Fabien feels out of place and seeks refuge

with Martine. She suggests they spend a weekend at Madeleine's place in the country: a big, remote, old house two hours' drive away. Surprised at first, Fabien decides Madeleine has changed her mind about him, and is making an effort.

The weekend gets off to a good start: they've barely arrived before the two women have laid the table and opened a decent bottle of wine. The trio clink their crystal glasses. The food is delicious, the atmosphere warm and welcoming. The stuffed deer's head on the wall gazes down at them with melting, doe eyes. They are the best of friends. Fabien feels great. If only this moment could last forever... And then everything falls apart. Madeleine reveals Fabien's true identity to Martine. She has lured him here the better to do away with him. Soon, Fabien feels the cold barrel of a gun at his temple. In a desperate bid for survival, Fabien throws himself into a fight with Madeleine, taking a bullet to the knee. He has fallen unconscious when a second shot rings out...

The pain wakes him. Fabien finds himself in a bedroom, with a rough, blood-soaked bandage on his leg. Through the window, he sees cows grazing peacefully in the next-door field, leading their enviably simple lives. The cows are his only companions now. Smiling, Martine administers tranquilisers, calmly explaining that Madeleine had become quite impossible: she was forced to seize the gun, get rid of her, and store the body in the freezer. They were free of her now, and ready to move on in peace... together. Fabien had given Martine an undreamed-of opportunity: to free herself from Madeleine, the woman who had been running her life for years.

Wracked with fever, Fabien realises he is Martine's hostage, and that no doctor is coming to examine him or free him from his current predicament. When Martine is forced to go out and buy food one day, Fabien decides to explore the house. It comes as no great surprise to discover the shutters closed, the doors locked and the telephone cut. Martine returns in a cheerful mood, and suggests a romantic dinner. They clink glasses in front of the fire, like any cosy couple. Fabien tries suggesting an outing, but Martine turns mad with rage, stamping on his damaged knee before going upstairs to bed alone.

Martine leaves Fabien without treatment for two days, forcing him to take sleeping pills to keep him quiet. Eventually, she breaks the ice by disinfecting the wound, cutting into it and dosing it with alcohol. The two are reconciled.

When Martine goes out a second time, Fabien—gripped with fever—thinks he sees his friend Gilles among the cows in the field. Soon, Gilles is there beside him in the bedroom, horrified by what he has found. Worried by the turn Fabien's relationship with the two women seemed to be taking (though he did not know them personally), Gilles had managed to get his

friend to leave the name of the nearest village, before setting off for the country weekend. Now, he tries to get Fabien out of the house. They reach the ground floor, but Gilles' head is blown apart by Martine, back from shopping, armed and dangerous. The doe-eyed hunting trophy gazes down on a second murder scene. Gently, Martine helps Fabien back upstairs to bed. Tenderly, she administers a sleeping pill, then cleans up in the sitting room.

In the dead of night, Martine forces Fabien out on the run. Two murders, a stranger appearing at the house out of nowhere... the place is no longer safe, and Martine wants to leave. Fabien has no idea where they are headed. The following evening, they reach a small roadside inn and decide to spend the night. After a few days, Martine decides the two proprietors are getting overly inquisitive and kills them both in cold blood. Then, without a word, she hands the revolver to Fabien. There is a single bullet left.

In a final twist, Fabien saves himself and takes refuge at his father's house. The old man takes care of him, in his own way, feeding him in silence, asking no questions. One evening, the telephone rings. Laure is worried. Gilles left in her car a week ago, and she's heard nothing since. Does Fabien know where he is? Fabien denies all knowledge. He hasn't seen Gilles. Laure threatens to call the police. Fabien stays silent.

Next day, the police come to question Fabien. He holds out for twenty minutes or so, then tells them everything. The police find the two bodies at Madeleine's house. Martine is there too, hiding out, in a weakened state.

The novel ends with Martine's trial.



# **CHARACTERS**

**Fabien Delorme:** The main character, Fabien, is the passive spectator of his own life. An everyman loser, forty-something, a city-dweller who doesn't get out much, cheated on by his wife. Left a widower, lonely and off the rails, he discovers unexpected personal resources, and enacts a plan 'to steal that other man's wife'. Soon, the situation turns against him. His one decisive action in life leads to his downfall: taken hostage after an infernal escalation of events, Fabien's world collapses around him. He's a likeable character nonetheless, aspiring to nothing more than a quiet life, and love; a sensitive man, genuinely ensnared by Martine's show of fragility. This side of his character is well suited to be addressed and explored in greater depth, in various ways, in a film or TV adaptation of his story.

**Martine Arnoult:** '...a pale little blonde of about thirty, with staring eyes, practically no lips, and dressed in navy and beige. She looked like an overexposed photo with so little presence that one wondered if she was capable of casting a shadow.' At first glance, her character echoes her appearance: a timid, self-effacing woman who lets others decide everything in her place—first her parents, then her husband Martial, and finally Madeleine. But beneath her quiet exterior, her anger is brewing. Martine sees her meeting with Fabien as a unique opportunity to take control of her life, and rid herself of Madeleine in the process. Her complex personality reveals itself. She is a killer. No one and nothing will stand in her way. The accumulated frustrations of her life come bursting out: she's in sole charge now.

**Madeleine:** an authoritarian woman, with a suspicious nature: '...a muscular fifty-year-old with the sharp eye of a bodyguard under a fringe of brown hair sprinkled with grey.' Madeleine is used to being in complete control. Her friendship with Martine is underscored by their ongoing struggle: Martine stole her husband, but they have remained friends. On the other hand, Madeleine's hatred for her ex is such that ultimately, she kills him, leaving Martine a young widow, since when Madeleine has ruled supreme over every aspect of her friend's life. Inevitably, Fabien is perceived as a threat. For Madeleine, Fabien represents the male presence she thought she had expunged from her life forever. She does everything she can to eliminate the intruder, and is prepared to use lethal force if necessary. At the same time, Madeleine underestimates Martine. Martine's seizure of power is utterly unexpected, catching her friend off disastrously off-balance.

**Gilles:** The archetypal male best friend, Gilles takes Fabien in after his wife's death. Worried about Fabien's relationship with Martine and Madeleine, he does everything in his power to find his friend once Fabien has disappeared, apparently without trace.

**Monsieur Delorme:** a silent but loving father, Delorme's house is a safe haven for Fabien after he has escaped Martine's clutches.

**Laure:** Fabien's wife's best friend. Gilles borrows her car when he sets off on Fabien's trail. After Gilles' disappearance, Laure raises the alarm with the police.

# **COMMENTARY**

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Pascal Garnier's world is *noir* shot through with black comedy. His characters — seemingly, quite ordinary men and women — find their lives skidding out of control under the impact of outrageous, 'absurd' events. In this context, *Front Seat Passenger's* filmic potential is apparent from the opening scenes: a simple plot, a powerful hook, a small cast of characters, a limited range of settings, often very funny dialogue, a situation transposable to many different countries, a clear timeline, a short original novel. Pascal Garnier excels in portraying ordinary lives. He's a stylist with an eye for telling detail, and a skilled painter of atmosphere, comparable to Simenon (according to the leading Irish novelist and screen writer John Banville). *Front Seat Passenger* is a fine showcase for two female leads: the relentless, daily power-struggle between Madeleine and Martine is pitiless and doomed, calling to mind Simone Signoret and Véra Clouzot in Henri-Georges Clouzot's *Les Diaboliques*, or Sandrine Bonnaire and Isabelle Huppert in Claude Chabrol's *La Cérémonie*. *Front Seat Passenger* also offers a rich vein of comedy, and superbly-handled role and plot reversals. Ultimately, the peril originates where we expect it least. The deranged characters and dark yet comic atmosphere offer broad scope for a variety of adaptations. Pascal Garnier's novels are often compared to films by the Coen brothers or Albert Dupontel. *Front Seat Passenger* is precisely the kind of explosive cocktail these directors love: black humor, serial killings, seemingly ordinary but ultimately disturbing characters. The book is a film waiting to be made: just add the soundtrack. The story has broad appeal, too, as a black comedy of manners: a cheated husband, another husband stolen away, then killed, two women locked in combat as 'best enemies'. The tale offers directors abundant scope for adaptation and expansion, bringing their own, unique perspective to the mix.

## **CONCLUSION**

Several novels by Pascal Garnier have been adapted for the French TV screen. Garnier's writing is highly visual. He's a skilled 'painter' of atmosphere, and an accomplished author of dialogue. His deceptively simple stories offer unexpected peaks and troughs, building to dysfunctional dénouements and serial killings. Above all, the reader—and by extension, the viewer—is drawn willingly into Garnier's delightfully queasy world. And soon, we're completely hooked.

### **CINEMATIC REFERENCES**

Joel and Ethan Coen; Albert Dupontel; the black comedies of Pedro Almodovar.

### **LITERARY AWARDS / REVIEWS**

'The True Heir of Simenon' John Banville 2014

'A small but perfectly formed piece of darkest noir fiction told in spare, mordant prose ... Recounted with disconcerting matter-of-factness, this marvellously unpredictable story is surreal and horrific in equal measure.'  
The Guardian

'A dark, richly odd and disconcerting world ... devastating and brilliant'  
Sunday Times

'Simenon's romans durs as channeled through the vision behind Wim Wenders' early films ...' Brian Greene, Crime Time

### **TRANSLATIONS**

*The Front Seat Passenger*, Gallic Books, 2014

# **EXCERPTS**

### **Excerpt 1: the 'screwball' atmosphere of Pascal Garnier**

'The morgue was right at the other end of the hospital, near the bins. Forlani turned back to Fabien and paused for a moment.

'Here it is.'

He sounded so serious that Fabien couldn't suppress the beginnings of a smile. The inspector was like a dwarf on tiptoes. As he pushed open the door, they had to stand aside to let two women pass, one young, the other a bit older, both very pale. The room was reminiscent of an office canteen – vast, with white tiles, glass and chrome. Forlani spoke to two men in short white coats. They glanced briefly at Fabien and pulled the handle of a sort of drawer. Sylvie slid out of the wall.

'Is this your wife?'

'Yes and no. It's the first time I've seen her dead. I mean, the first time I've seen a dead body. It's not at all like a living person.'

Forlani and the men in white coats exchanged looks of astonishment.'

### **Excerpt 2: Fabien gets unmasked: everything falls over**

'He ignored the little warning lights blinking in his brain – he couldn't help himself; he felt the need to talk about her, to unburden himself, to unfurl a carpet of truth in front of him. Like arriving at the beach on the first day of the holidays, you just want to get rid of your ragged old lies and run naked into the waves. The more entertaining he was, the more the two women laughed and the more he threw caution to the wind. He was about to tell them who he was. Now that they were friends, he was sure they would understand and everyone would feel better for knowing. Madeleine rose from the table and went to get the bottle of marc.

'A little glass with your coffee, Monsieur Delorme?'

'With pleas—'

A chasm opened up, a chasm in which he saw wounded angels dragging their wings. Madeleine had just called him by his name and was fixing him with her smile.

'Why are you calling him that?'

'Because his name is Fabien Delorme, isn't it?'

Fabien looked in vain for the prompter. He had lost his place in the script. Madeleine put the bottle down meaningfully in front of him.

'Madeleine, what does this mean?'

'It means, my dear Martine, that you see before you the husband of the woman who was in the car with Martial.'

'That can't be true!'

'Ask him.'

Should he deny it? Deny everything, deny the whole earth and his presence here, or just say yes. He only seemed to have two words at his disposal and he could enunciate neither one nor the other. Just like at school in front of the blackboard, he felt his ears going as red as the neon 'Tabac' sign. At that precise moment he felt about eight years old.

'Oi, I'm speaking to you! Are you the husband of the slut who was with that bastard Martial?'

'Fabien, say something!'

He had decided to make bread balls that he was piling into an ever-higher pyramid on his plate amongst the remains of the brown-coloured sauce. A whack on the neck forced him to turn towards Madeleine. She was pointing a revolver at him and it was only a few centimetres from his head.

'Tell her! Tell her!'

The words seemed to come from the barrel; he had never seen a gun so close up, he could smell metal and grease.

'Madeleine! What are you doing? You're nuts!'

'Not in the least. Haven't you understood yet? Why did you think he came with us? Did you think it was for your bonny blue eyes? ... He doesn't give a shit about those; he wants to take us down, that's it, isn't it? You want to take us down?'

Fabien didn't take his eyes off the weapon that was trembling at the end of Madeleine's outstretched arm. He could barely unclench his teeth to say, 'Madeleine, it's not what you think ... I was going to tell you everything ...'

'So there we have it! You follow us for weeks, all the way to Spain! Then you seduce Martine and alienate her from me and all for nothing. It's just a game to you! You think I'm a fool?'

'No, Madeleine, no, I don't take you for a fool. I ... I think I just couldn't bear to be on my own.'

'Is that all you can come up with? I'd expected better. I can tell you what you were after. You were after revenge. I don't know how, but you knew it was me who caused the accident, but as you didn't have any proof you thought you would win over Martine and get her to spill the beans.'

'That's not true! I didn't know, and what's more I don't care. I wasn't in love with Sylvie any more; I wanted a new life!'