



Bonuses: English Story Translations

Companion Guide for Our Top-Rated Book on Amazon:
Short Stories in French for Intermediate Learners

Full English translations for every story in the book

By MindSmith Books

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Introduction

Welcome to your *French Short Stories - Complete English Translations* guide!

You've been enjoying our French short stories book – thanks for making us a small part of your French language-learning journey. These complete English translations are designed to be a companion for the original book, helping you unlock every detail, cultural reference, and linguistic nuance from the 15 engaging stories you've been reading.

We know that sometimes you might translations to fully digest some parts of the book, confirm your understanding, or just to satisfy your curiosity about a particular phrase. That's exactly why we created this comprehensive translation guide – **so you can learn with confidence and never feel stuck.**

Each section contains the complete English translations of the stories, plus all the comprehension questions translated as well, maintaining the same formatting and structure as your French book, to make it easy to refer back.

How to Use This Translation Guide

- **Read the French first** – always attempt to understand the story in French before checking the translation (in the original book!). Look up specific sentences or paragraphs rather than reading the entire English version.
- **Check your comprehension** – after reading in French, you can then double-check your understanding in English
- **Learn cultural context** – use the translations to understand French cultural references and expressions that might not be obvious
- **Review the vocabulary** – compare how French expressions translate into natural English

Important Note: These translations are meant to support, not replace, your French reading practice. The magic happens when you read in French first, then use these translations to confirm, clarify, and deepen your understanding.

This guide pairs perfectly with your main French stories book – keep them together and use this translation guide whenever you need an extra boost.

Gracias!

– *The MindSmith Books Team*

1. The Bench Under the Plane Trees

Every Thursday morning, at exactly ten o'clock, Marcel made his way to the same bench. It had been his ritual for three years now, ever since his wife Élise was no longer there. The bench stood beneath the tall plane trees on the Place des Cardeurs, in the heart of Aix-en-Provence. The trees cast perfect shade over the spot, even during the heat of a Provençal summer.

That Thursday looked like any other. Marcel wore his usual beige jacket and had his newspaper, *La Provence*, tucked under his arm. But as he approached the bench, he stopped in his tracks. A young woman was sitting in his spot, eyes fixed on her mobile phone.

Marcel hesitated. Normally, passers-by never lingered on that bench. It was a little out of the way, not very practical for watching the market or waiting for a bus. That was exactly why Élise and he had chosen it, all those years ago.

"Excuse me," said Marcel, approaching gently.

The young woman looked up. She was about twenty-five, with chestnut hair and a shy smile.

"Yes?"

Marcel no longer knew what to say. He couldn't very well ask her to leave. The bench didn't belong to him, after all.

"I... I often sit here," he explained, a little awkwardly.

"Oh! I'm sorry. I can move over – there's plenty of room."

She shifted to the left, freeing up the right half of the bench. Marcel hesitated a moment longer, then sat down beside her, keeping a respectful distance.

What a strange situation, he thought. In three years, it was the first time he had shared his bench.

At first, they sat in silence. Marcel opened his newspaper, but couldn't concentrate on the headlines. The young woman continued to look at her phone, but he could sense she wasn't really absorbed by the screen.

"Nice day today," she said at last.

"Yes, lovely. That's why I come here. My wife used to love this spot."

The words had come out on their own. Marcel surprised himself. He never talked about Élise to strangers.

"Doesn't she come anymore?"

Marcel shook his head gently.

"She passed away three years ago."

"I'm sorry," murmured the young woman. "I'm Léa."

"Marcel."

They shook hands. Hers was warm and firm – not at all as he had imagined.

"Do you live in the neighbourhood?"

"Yes, rue Cardinale – forty years now. And you?"

"I've just moved to avenue Victor Hugo. I'm still finding my bearings in the city."

Marcel smiled. He remembered that feeling, even though it had been a very long time.

"Aix isn't that big. You get used to it quickly."

"I hope so. For now, I feel a bit lost."

Like me, thought Marcel, but for different reasons.

Time passed without either of them noticing. Léa told him about her new job at a bookshop on the Cours Mirabeau. Marcel recounted a few anecdotes about the neighbourhood – the little shops that had disappeared, the new ones opening up.

"I have to go," said Léa finally, checking the time on her phone. "I have an appointment with my landlord."

She stood up, then turned back to Marcel.

"Would you mind if I came back next Thursday? I love it here."

Marcel was surprised by his own reply:

"Not at all. Same time?"

"Perfect."

The following Thursday, Marcel arrived ten minutes early. He had brought two small coffees from the bar on the corner. Léa appeared at exactly ten o'clock, as agreed.

"You've thought of everything!" she said, accepting the coffee gratefully.

This time, the conversation flowed more naturally. Léa told him about her life in Bordeaux, about her decision to start fresh somewhere new. Marcel spoke of his years as a maths teacher, and his memories with Élise.

As the weeks went by, their weekly meeting became a fixture. Marcel discovered that Léa had a passion for literature and wrote short stories in the evenings after work. Léa learned that Marcel had two children who lived far away, and that he sometimes felt useless since his retirement.

One rainy Thursday in November, Léa arrived twenty minutes late.

"Sorry, Marcel! I had a problem at the bookshop."

"It's nothing, my dear. I was worried you might be ill."

The word *dear* had slipped out. That was what he used to call his daughter.

Léa smiled.

"You know, Marcel, these Thursday mornings have become very important to me."

"For me too," he admitted. "Élise would have liked to know you."

They sat in silence for a moment, watching the leaves of the plane trees fall softly onto the cobblestones.

Life sometimes holds the most wonderful surprises, thought Marcel. You just have to leave a little room on your bench.

Comprehension Check

1. How long has Marcel been coming to sit on the bench?

- a) One year b) Two years c) Three years d) Five years

2. Why did Marcel start coming to the bench?

- a) Because he likes to read the newspaper b) Because his wife passed away c) Because he is retired d) Because he lives nearby

3. What is Léa's profession?

- a) Teacher b) Writer c) She works in a bookshop d) Landlord

4. What does Marcel bring for their second meeting?

- a) Newspapers b) Two small coffees c) Books d) Pastries

5. What was it that Marcel and Léa were both missing most?

- a) Money b) Work c) Human company d) A place to live

Answers: 1.c, 2.b, 3.c, 4.b, 5.c

2. No Bread Today

At seven in the morning, as she had done every day for fifteen years, Madame Dubois headed to the Moreau bakery. She needed her daily baguette and two croissants for her husband. But on arriving at the shop window, she stopped short. A small sign was stuck to the glass door: "Closed today."

Closed? she thought. *In the middle of the week?*

Madame Dubois tried to peer through the window. The shelves were empty, the machines silent. No trace of Monsieur Moreau, the baker.

"What's going on?" asked a voice behind her.

It was Monsieur Lachaud, the bakery's neighbour, out walking his dog.

"I don't know. It's closed," replied Madame Dubois, pointing to the sign.

"Closed? But that's impossible! Moreau has never closed – not even when he had the flu last year."

Within a few minutes, a small group of regulars had gathered outside the bakery. Madame Leclerc, who came for her rye bread, Monsieur Petit with his wicker shopping basket, and even Julie, the young primary school teacher who always stopped by before school.

"Maybe he's ill?" suggested Julie.

"Or he's had an accident!" said Madame Leclerc, always inclined toward the dramatic.

"No, no," Monsieur Lachaud cut in. "His van's there – look. It's parked out back as usual."

Sure enough, Monsieur Moreau's little white van was in its usual spot.

"So why isn't he opening?" insisted Madame Dubois.

The mystery was deepening. Normally, at this hour, the smell of fresh bread would already be spreading throughout the street. But this morning – nothing.

"I'm going to Durand's," announced Madame Leclerc. "It's further, but at least I'll get my bread."

The Durand bakery was a fifteen-minute walk away, on the other side of the town centre. Several people decided to follow her.

But around ten o'clock, rumours began to circulate. Madame Grandin, who had just come back from Durand's, claimed to have seen Monsieur Moreau in deep conversation with a man in a suit. A bank representative, she believed.

"He's going to close for good," she told the few curious onlookers still gathered outside the bakery. "He's in debt."

This news spread quickly through the neighbourhood. By midday, everyone knew. Monsieur Moreau had financial troubles. The bakery was going to disappear.

"It's a disaster!" lamented Madame Dubois at the market. "Where are we going to buy our bread now?"

"We have to do something," said Monsieur Petit. "This bakery has been here for thirty years. My father used to buy his bread there!"

The speculation continued all afternoon. Madame Leclerc now maintained that Monsieur Moreau had gone on holiday without warning. Julie thought he might have had a row with his wife. Monsieur Lachaud, for his part, stood by his theory of sudden illness.

"You're all talking nonsense!" exclaimed Madame Grandin. "I'm telling you, he's in debt!"

The discussions grew increasingly animated. Everyone had their own opinion, their own version of events. Word of mouth was working at full pace.

Around five in the afternoon, a small crowd had gathered again outside the bakery. People were studying the sign, hoping to find an additional clue.

It was then that Monsieur Moreau appeared around the corner. He walked normally, looking relaxed, a bunch of flowers in hand.

"Monsieur Moreau!" cried Madame Dubois. "What happened? We were all worried!"

The baker stopped, surprised by the surrounding commotion.

"Worried? But why?"

"Your bakery was closed! You've never closed!"

Monsieur Moreau smiled gently.

"Ah yes, that's true. I'm sorry – I should have let you know. Today was my wedding anniversary. Forty years! I wanted to give my wife a surprise. We went to have lunch in Deauville, like on our honeymoon."

An embarrassed silence fell over the little group. All those rumours, all those dramatic theories – for a simple romantic outing!

"Forty years of marriage! Congratulations!" said Julie at last, a little red in the face.

"Thank you. And don't worry – I'll reopen tomorrow morning at six o'clock, as usual. With extra-fresh bread, to make it up to you!"

The neighbourhood residents slowly dispersed, a little ashamed of their exaggerated speculations. Madame Grandin muttered something about bank representatives; Madame Leclerc adjusted her handbag with dignity.

Monsieur Moreau went into his bakery whistling, bouquet still in hand. Tomorrow, the smell of fresh bread would fill the street once more. And perhaps, he hoped, a little less gossip.

The people in this neighbourhood really have too much imagination, he thought as he turned on the ovens. But that's part of its charm, too.

Comprehension Check

1. Why does Madame Dubois go to the bakery?

- a) To buy pastries
- b) For her daily baguette and some croissants
- c) To chat with the baker
- d) To buy rye bread

2. What is Madame Grandin's first theory?

- a) The baker is on holiday
- b) He has had an accident
- c) He is in debt and going to close
- d) He is ill

3. How long has the Moreau bakery been open?

- a) Fifteen years
- b) Twenty years
- c) Thirty years
- d) Forty years

4. What is the real reason for the closure?

- a) Financial problems
- b) The baker's illness
- c) Wedding anniversary
- d) Argument with his wife

5. Where did Monsieur Moreau go with his wife?

- a) To Paris
- b) To Deauville
- c) To the market
- d) To the doctor

Answers: 1.b, 2.c, 3.c, 4.c, 5.b

3. The Brother's Return

Camille heard the key turn in the lock at exactly half past seven. She froze on her sofa, her cup of camomile tea still warm between her hands. After five years away, Thomas was back.

"Hey, sis!" called her brother, pushing open the door of the Lyon apartment.

His voice had changed. Deeper, more assured. Camille stood up slowly to welcome him but kept her distance. Thomas had grown – not in height, but in presence. His hair was shorter, his clothes smarter. He wore a black leather jacket she didn't recognise.

"Hi, Tom."

They looked at each other for a moment without moving. Five years was a long time. Long enough for two people to become strangers.

"You've changed the layout of the living room," Thomas observed, scanning the room.

"Mum and Dad left me the flat. I made a few changes."

A few changes? In reality, Camille had transformed everything after her parents retired. The dark family furniture had gone, replaced by modern, colourful pieces. The beige walls were now painted white and pastel green.

Thomas put his suitcase down near the entrance and walked over to the window overlooking Place Bellecour.

"At least the view hasn't changed."

"No – thankfully."

Camille didn't know what else to say. She had imagined this moment hundreds of times, but now that he was here, the words wouldn't come.

"Would you like something to drink?" she finally offered.

"A coffee, if you have one."

Camille headed to the kitchen. Their parents had renovated it the year before they left, but she had added her own touches: pot plants, glass jars, a sophisticated coffee machine she had bought with her first salary as an engineer.

"Are you still working at Rhône-Alpes Énergie?" asked Thomas from the living room.

"Yes," replied Camille, making the coffee. "And what about you? How did it go — Canada?"

"Well. Very well, actually. Montreal is a fantastic city."

His voice was neutral and professional. As if he were talking to a colleague rather than his sister.

Camille came back with two cups. Thomas had sat down in the armchair their father used to occupy. That bothered her more than she would have expected.

"How long are you planning to stay?" she asked, settling onto the sofa.

"I don't know yet. It depends."

"Depends on what?"

Thomas took a sip of coffee before answering.

"A number of things. The company has offered me a position in Lyon. Head of marketing for Europe."

Camille felt her stomach tighten. Thomas coming back for good? She wasn't sure she was ready.

"That's... that's a good opportunity."

"Yes. Very good. But I'm not sure I want to come back and live here."

Here, thought Camille. Not 'in Lyon'. Here. In this flat.

"You can find your own place, you know. Property in Lyon is expensive, but with your new salary..."

"It's not about money," Thomas interrupted. "It's more complicated than that."

Camille waited for him to explain, but Thomas stayed silent. He was looking out of the window, lost in thought.

"Tom, what happened in Canada? You left so suddenly, you almost never called..."

"I needed distance."

"Distance from what?"

Thomas turned to look at her. For the first time since he'd arrived, Camille recognised her little brother in his eyes.

"From everything. From family, from Lyon, from this suffocating life that had been mapped out for us."

The words hurt. Camille had always thought they were a close-knit family — traditional, certainly, but harmonious.

"Suffocating?"

"Yes, Camille. Did you never realise? Dad deciding what we would study, Mum planning our holidays until we were twenty-five, you going along with everything without ever objecting..."

"I loved that stability!"

"It was suffocating me. I felt like I couldn't breathe."

Camille set her cup down a little too forcefully. The sound echoed in the silent living room.

"So you left. Without any explanation. Leaving us to worry."

"I knew you'd take care of everything. You always take care of everything."

That sentence hurt Camille more than any direct reproach. Was that really how Thomas saw her? The responsible, predictable daughter who takes care of everything?

"And now?" she asked, her voice tense.

"Now, I don't know anymore. Five years in Canada taught me a great deal. About myself, about what I really want. But coming back here... it's strange."

Thomas stood up and took a few steps around the room.

"This apartment was our family cocoon. But you've made it into something else. It's become your space."

Camille realised he was right. In transforming the flat, she had made it her own. She had erased the traces of the old family life to build her own.

"Do you think I was wrong to do that?"

"No, not at all. It was necessary. For you as much as for me."

They sat in silence for a moment. Outside, Lyon was coming alive for the evening. Terraces were filling up, trams were running across the square.

"Tom," said Camille at last, "if you take this job, we'll find a way. For the flat, for us. We're not the same people we were before."

Thomas smiled – his first real smile since he'd arrived.

"You're right. We're not the same. Maybe that's a good thing."

Comprehension Check

1. How long was Thomas away?

- a) Three years b) Four years c) Five years d) Six years

2. What did Camille change in the apartment?

- a) Only the kitchen b) The furniture and the colours c) Nothing at all d) Only the view

3. What position was Thomas offered?

- a) Engineer b) Head of Marketing for Europe c) Managing Director d) Consultant

4. Why did Thomas leave for Canada?

a) To study b) For money c) Because he felt suffocated d) Because of an argument

5. How does the conversation between the siblings end?

a) With an argument b) Thomas leaves immediately c) They accept that they have both changed d) Camille asks him to leave

Answers: 1.c, 2.b, 3.b, 4.c, 5.c

4. The Yellow Bicycle

Margot discovered the yellow bicycle one Tuesday morning, abandoned against a plane tree in front of her apartment building in Nantes. It was rusty and battered, with a broken chain and flat tyres. But its bright yellow colour, despite the scratches, made her want to rescue it.

Someone's surely thrown it away, she thought, examining the bike more closely. What a shame – it could come back to life.

Margot was a freelance graphic designer who worked from home. She had always enjoyed tinkering, repairing objects that others had written off as hopeless. This yellow bicycle was the perfect challenge for her weekends.

She dragged the bike down to her building's cellar and began assessing the damage. The chain was indeed broken, but repairable. The tyres needed reinflating and possibly replacing. The derailleur was bent, but not beyond fixing.

"This is going to be a big job!" she murmured with a smile.

The following weekend, Margot went to the cycle shop on rue de la Bastille. Monsieur Ferrand, the owner, was an elderly man who knew everything about bicycles.

"A yellow bike?" he said, looking surprised, as he glanced over the list of parts she needed. "Is this for a restoration?"

"Yes – I found this bike outside my building. It looked sad, so I decided to give it a new lease of life."

Monsieur Ferrand smiled.

"I like people like you. These days, everyone throws things away and buys new. You repair. That's admirable."

He helped her choose the right parts and gave her some tips on the repairs.

Margot spent the next three weekends in the cellar, taking the bike apart and putting it back together. She replaced the chain, fixed the derailleur, changed the brake pads. The new tyres gave the bike an almost brand-new look.

When she finished the restoration, the result surprised even her. The yellow bicycle now shone under the cellar light. It was magnificent.

The following Monday, Margot decided to test her handiwork. She took the bike out of the cellar and did a first lap around the neighbourhood. It rode perfectly – smooth and silent.

She got into the habit of cycling around the city on her yellow bike. To the Talensac market, to meet friends in the town centre, or simply for a ride along the Loire.

Before long, the yellow bicycle attracted attention. People turned to look as she passed. Some smiled; others pointed.

"Great bike!" said an elderly lady at the market one day.

"One of a kind!" commented a cyclist at a red light.

Margot was proud of her work, but she began to notice something odd. A dark-haired man in his thirties kept crossing her path during her rides. First on the quay along the Loire, then near the Machines de l'île, and even in front of the cathedral. Always on a black bicycle, always at a respectful distance.

Coincidence? she wondered. *Or is he actually following me?*

One Saturday afternoon, as she stopped to have a coffee on the terrace of a bistrot on rue Crébillon, the man on the black bicycle approached.

"Excuse me," he said, shyly. "Could I bother you for a minute?"

Margot looked up. He seemed friendly – a sincere smile and laughing eyes.

"Of course."

"My name is Antoine. I've been crossing paths with you around the city for several weeks now. Your yellow bike... it's exceptional."

"Thank you. I restored it myself."

"That's what I thought," Antoine continued, sitting down timidly at her table. "You see – this bike used to be mine."

Margot nearly choked on her coffee.

"Your bike?"

"Yes. I'd left it outside your building about two months ago. When I came back to get it, it was gone. I assumed it had been stolen."

Margot felt herself blush.

"But... it looked abandoned! The chain was broken, the tyres..."

"I know!" Antoine said quickly. "I'd had a minor accident. The chain snapped and I hadn't had time to come back for it straight away. But when I went back..."

"It wasn't there anymore," Margot finished, mortified.

"Exactly. But look at the result! You've done an incredible job. This bike has never looked so beautiful."

They looked at each other in silence for a moment. Margot wasn't sure whether to apologise or hand the bike back immediately.

"Listen," Antoine said, "I have a suggestion. You've invested a lot of time and money in this restoration. The bike suits you perfectly. Keep it."

"But it's your bike!"

"Not anymore. You gave it a second life. It's become yours."

Margot hesitated.

"In exchange," Antoine continued with a mischievous smile, "you could perhaps teach me your restoration techniques? I have an old red bike at home that could do with the same treatment."

Margot burst out laughing.

"Are you using bike stories to chat me up?"

"Maybe just a little," admitted Antoine, going slightly red.

"In that case – deal. But first, let me buy you a coffee. It's the least I can do after 'stealing' your bike."

Antoine settled comfortably at her table.

"With pleasure. And you can tell me how you managed to turn that wreck into a gem."

Margot looked at her yellow bicycle parked in front of the terrace. It glittered in the Nantes sunshine, still catching the eyes of passers-by.

Comprehension Check

1. What is Margot's profession?

- a) Mechanic
- b) Freelance graphic designer
- c) Bicycle shop assistant
- d) Teacher

2. Where does Margot repair the bike?

- a) In her bedroom
- b) In the street
- c) In her building's cellar
- d) At a repair shop

3. Who was the true owner of the bicycle?

- a) Monsieur Ferrand
- b) A stranger
- c) Antoine
- d) A neighbour

4. Why had Antoine left his bike behind?

- a) He no longer liked it
- b) It was broken after an accident
- c) He had bought a new one
- d) He had sold it

5. What does Antoine propose to Margot?

- a) To buy the bicycle back
- b) To keep the bike in exchange for repair lessons
- c) To share the bicycle
- d) To reimburse her money

5. The Phantom Roommate

Hugo moved into the Parisian apartment on a rainy Thursday afternoon. The flat-share was perfect: two bedrooms, a bright living room, and above all, affordable rent in the fifteenth arrondissement. The only snag? His flatmate, Maxime, was invisible.

"He works a tremendous amount," Sarah, the landlady, had explained when she handed over the keys. "He's an IT consultant. Very discreet, very tidy. You'll practically never see him."

Practically never was something of an understatement. After three weeks, Hugo had only glimpsed Maxime once: a furtive silhouette disappearing into his room at around six in the morning.

At first, Hugo appreciated the peace. He could phone his mother without disturbing anyone, watch his TV series on the sofa, cook his buttery pasta without having to endure anyone's comments. It was like living alone, but paying half the rent.

But soon the situation became strange. Was Maxime really there? Hugo began watching for signs of his presence. A dirty cup in the sink in the morning. Biscuit crumbs on the worktop. The fridge mysteriously running low on his favourite Greek yoghurt.

He definitely exists, Hugo told himself. *But what exactly does he do?*

Hugo developed increasingly elaborate theories. Maybe Maxime was an international spy operating from his laptop. Or a modern vampire who only went out at night to feed on frozen pizza and energy drinks.

More seriously, Hugo imagined Maxime as a computer genius, locked in his room, developing a revolutionary app that would change the world. Or perhaps he was agoraphobic and couldn't handle social interactions.

These speculations amused Hugo. He invented details about his phantom flatmate's life. Maxime drank only green tea. He collected manga figurines. He had a secret aquarium in his room with exotic fish.

One Friday evening, Hugo decided to take the experiment further. He prepared a dinner for two: homemade lasagne, green salad, and a bottle of red wine. He set the table in the living room and waited.

"Maxime!" he called toward the closed bedroom. "I've made food! Would you like to share?"

No answer. Hugo ate alone, but left a covered plate on the table with a little note: "For Maxime – Reheat for 2 minutes in the microwave. Bon appétit!"

The following morning, the plate was empty and washed up. Beside it, a scribbled note: "Thank you, it was delicious. M."

Hugo smiled. His phantom flatmate had neat handwriting and appreciated Italian cooking.

In the weeks that followed, Hugo multiplied his little gestures. He left interesting magazines on the living room table – *Sciences et Vie*, *National Geographic*, *Philosophie Magazine*. He bought organic biscuits and arranged them in a clear jar on the kitchen counter.

Maxime responded discreetly. The magazines disappeared and reappeared, carefully folded. The biscuit jar gradually emptied. Sometimes, Hugo found new ingredients in the fridge: goat's cheese, black olives, artisan honey.

He's joining in, in his own way, thought Hugo. It's a passive but functional flat-share.

One November evening, Hugo was returning from drinks with colleagues when he heard classical music coming from the living room. He approached quietly and discovered a dark-haired man in his thirties, sitting on the sofa with a book and a cup of tea.

The man looked up and froze.

"Um... hello," he said awkwardly. "I'm Maxime."

"Hugo!" exclaimed Hugo with a broad smile. "At last! I'd almost started to think you were a myth."

Maxime went slightly red.

"Sorry for the mystery. My hours are all over the place. And I tend to avoid first encounters. It's... complicated for me."

"No problem at all. Thanks for the olives last week, by the way."

"And thank you for the lasagne last month."

They looked at each other and laughed. The ice was broken.

"Would you like some tea?" offered Maxime. "I was just about to make another cup."

"Love some."

Hugo settled onto the sofa. Maxime arranged two cups on the coffee table and poured the steaming tea.

"So," Hugo admitted, "I spent two months imagining your life. You were at various points a spy, a vampire, a reclusive computer genius..."

Maxime burst out laughing.

"The reality is more mundane. I'm a developer for an American startup. I work on the same schedule as San Francisco. When you're sleeping, I'm at my desk. When you leave for work, I go to bed."

"And the social interactions?"

"Always difficult. But your little gestures touched me. The magazines, the biscuits... that was kind."

"I was curious to meet my mysterious flatmate."

"Well, now you know. A shy developer who works nights and loves homemade lasagne."

Hugo raised his cup.

"To the end of the mystery, and the beginning of a real flat-share!"

Maxime clinked cups with him, smiling for the first time since Hugo had moved in.

All things considered, thought Hugo, reality was nicer than any of his theories.

Comprehension Check

1. In which arrondissement is the apartment?

- a) The tenth b) The fifteenth c) The twentieth d) The fifth

2. What is Maxime's job?

- a) Spy b) Software developer c) Vampire d) Landlord

3. How does Hugo try to communicate with Maxime?

- a) By knocking on his door b) By sending him text messages c) By leaving meals and magazines d) By writing him letters

4. Why does Maxime avoid Hugo?

- a) He doesn't like him b) He has unusual hours and difficulty with social interactions c) He is actually a vampire d) He is moving out soon

5. How does their first real conversation end?

- a) With an argument b) With a friendly toast c) Maxime goes back to his room d) Hugo moves out

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.c, 4.b, 5.b

6. A Parking Spot

At exactly six in the evening, Sophie turned into rue Paradis in Marseille. After an exhausting twelve-hour day at the hospital where she worked as a nurse, she had one obsession: finding a parking space near home. In the Noailles neighbourhood, that was a daily challenge.

She spotted a free space outside the pharmacy. *At last!* she thought. Sophie slowed down and flicked on her right indicator. She was beginning her reverse parking manoeuvre when a red Clio appeared from nowhere and slipped into the space.

"What on earth!" cried Sophie, honking her horn.

She lowered her window and called out to the driver as he got out of his car.

"Excuse me! I was there first! I had my indicator on!"

The man – about forty, with curly hair and a couple of days' stubble – turned around. He was wearing an Olympique de Marseille T-shirt.

"Sorry, love, but it's every man for himself!" he shot back with a strongly pronounced Marseille accent. "You were going too slowly!"

"Slowly? I was doing my manoeuvre! It's basic courtesy!"

"Courtesy, courtesy... If we waited around for courtesy in Marseille, we'd never park at all!"

Sophie double-parked her car and got out, cheeks flushed with anger.

"Are you serious? I've done twelve hours at the hospital! I'm exhausted! And you just swipe my space like that?"

The man crossed his arms, though his expression softened slightly.

"Twelve hours at the hospital? Are you a doctor?"

"Nurse. Emergency department. And I live right up there, on the third floor."

She pointed to the ochre-coloured building typical of the neighbourhood.

The man hesitated. Behind Sophie, several cars had started honking because of the double-parking.

"Look," he said at last, "I'm Bruno. I understand you're tired, but I've had a rough day too."

"Oh yes? And what exhausting job do you do?"

"Taxi driver. Fifteen hours at the wheel today. Traffic jams, rude passengers, lost tourists... The music festival at the Vieux-Port drove me mad."

Sophie paused. She knew all about Marseille traffic jams, especially during events.

"Taxi driver? So... you work to help people too?"

"In a manner of speaking. When they're not being sick on me or walking off without paying."

Despite her anger, Sophie couldn't help giving a slight smile.

"All right, we're both tired and wound up. But that space was still mine first!"

"Maybe, but I'm the one who took it!" Bruno retorted with a teasing smile.

Behind them, the honking was growing more insistent. A man leaned out of his window and shouted:

"Hey! Can you argue somewhere else? Some of us are trying to get through!"

Sophie and Bruno looked at each other. The situation was becoming ridiculous.

"Right," said Sophie, "what do we do? Flip a coin?"

"Or... I have another idea," said Bruno, thinking it over.

He rummaged in his pocket and pulled out a parking ticket.

"I bought a two-hour ticket. There's an hour and a half left on it. I'll give it to you, and in an hour and a half, whoever gets here first takes the space."

Sophie frowned.

"That's a strange arrangement..."

"Come on! Besides, look – it's starting to rain. You don't want to get soaked over a parking space!"

Indeed, the first drops of Mediterranean rain were beginning to fall.

"Fine," sighed Sophie. "But I'm setting my alarm for an hour and a half from now!"

Bruno handed her the ticket with a broad smile.

"Deal! And... sorry about just now. Tiredness makes you aggressive."

"I was a bit sharp myself."

They shook hands under the rain, which was beginning to pick up.

An hour and a half later, Sophie came back down with her umbrella. Bruno was already there, leaning against his Clio, looking at his phone.

"So? Who won?" she asked.

"A tie! We arrived at the same time!"

They both burst out laughing.

"Right," said Bruno, "I have a suggestion. There's a little café on the corner – Chez Mimile. What do you say we go and have a pastis to celebrate our draw?"

Sophie thought for a moment. It was raining harder and harder, and the idea of a Marseille apéritif didn't displease her.

"Why not? But you're paying, since you did steal my space."

"Deal! And tomorrow, I promise, I'll leave my space for the first tired nurse or nurse I come across!"

They headed toward the café, laughing, leaving the famous parking space empty in the rain.

"By the way," said Sophie as they pushed open the door of Chez Mimile, "how did you know I was a nurse before I told you?"

Bruno smiled mischievously.

"Your badge is sticking out of your pocket. And besides, you have that tired but kind look that all healthcare workers have."

Sophie shook her head with a smile.

"Well, you're observant for a parking space thief!"

"And you forgive easily for someone who works in A&E!"

The storm was rumbling over Marseille, but in the small, warm café, two strangers were discovering that maybe they weren't so different after all.

Comprehension Check

1. Where does Sophie work?

- a) In a pharmacy
- b) At the hospital, in the emergency department
- c) In a café
- d) In a taxi

2. Why did Bruno have a difficult day?

- a) He was ill
- b) He had an accident
- c) Music festival and traffic jams
- d) He was looking for work

3. What solution does Bruno propose to resolve the conflict?

- a) Flip a coin
- b) Share his parking ticket
- c) Call the police
- d) Fight it out

4. What happens when they come back for the space?

- a) Sophie arrives first
- b) Bruno arrives first
- c) They arrive at the same time
- d) The space has been taken by someone else

5. Where do they end up spending the evening?

- a) Each at home
- b) At the hospital
- c) In a café, over a pastis
- d) In Bruno's taxi

Answers: 1.b, 2.c, 3.b, 4.c, 5.c

7. Too Much Chocolate

Juliette pushed open the door of the Weiss chocolate shop at six in the morning. The heady smell of warm cocoa welcomed her, as it did every day since she'd started three months ago. But this March morning, three weeks before Easter, the atmosphere was particularly tense.

"At last!" exclaimed Monsieur Weiss, the owner. "Orders are piling up and we're already behind!"

The small artisanal chocolate shop in Strasbourg was buckling under demand. Easter eggs, chocolate rabbits, decorated bells, multicoloured hens – production was in full swing.

Juliette put on her white apron and tied back her hair. A pastry student at the hotel and catering college, she was working at Weiss as an apprentice to fund her studies. Normally, she loved this job. But the Easter period turned the chocolate shop into a veritable factory.

"Today," announced Monsieur Weiss, "we need to finish a hundred and fifty rabbits for the Galeries Lafayette order. And eighty personalised eggs for the Hilton."

Juliette quietly sighed. She who had dreamed of creativity and innovation was spending her days reproducing the same shapes over and over again.

The work began. Tempering the chocolate, moulding, unmoulding, coating... The gestures repeated mechanically. By ten o'clock, Juliette had already poured thirty rabbits. Her hands were stained with chocolate, her arms aching from the repetitive movements.

"Faster!" encouraged Monsieur Weiss. "Madame Dubois from Hermès is coming to collect her order at three o'clock!"

Around midday, the fatigue was beginning to set in. Juliette had been handling hot chocolate for six consecutive hours. The heat of the workshop, the humidity, the constant smell of cocoa – everything was contributing to her growing discomfort.

She set about decorating a giant egg with complex floral patterns. Maximum concentration required. A precise movement of the piping bag to create a perfect rose... But her hands were trembling slightly.

A split second of inattention, and the piping bag slipped. Instead of a delicate rose, Juliette traced a huge brown smear across the white egg.

"No!" she groaned.

Monsieur Weiss rushed over.

"What happened?"

"I... I ruined the decoration. Sorry, I'll start again."

"Start again? But Juliette, that egg took us two hours! We don't have time!"

Juliette felt tears welling up. The pressure, the exhaustion, and now this stupid mistake...

"I know, I'm so sorry. It's just that... my hands ache, I'm hot, and I can't concentrate anymore."

Monsieur Weiss looked at his young apprentice. For the first time since the season had begun, he noticed her dark circles, her pallor, her obvious exhaustion.

"Juliette, sit down for a minute."

He brought her a glass of cold water and sat down across from her.

"How long has it been since you had a proper break?"

"Um... yesterday I had fifteen minutes for lunch. And the day before..."

"Stop. You've been working non-stop for three weeks. That's inhumane."

Juliette looked up, surprised.

"But the orders..."

"The orders can wait an hour. Just look at yourself! You're completely worn out!"

Monsieur Weiss examined the damaged egg.

"And you know what? We can make something original out of this stain."

He took a spatula and skilfully transformed the smear into a stylised butterfly.

"There! A unique design. Modern. Different from our usual creations."

Juliette's eyes went wide.

"It's... it's beautiful!"

"Exactly. Sometimes mistakes become innovations. But to innovate, you need to be rested, inspired. Not exhausted."

He stood up and wrote something on the wall planner.

"From now on, a mandatory thirty-minute break every three hours. And Sunday is a complete rest day – even during peak season."

"But Monsieur Weiss, the profitability..."

"Pah! An apprentice who's ill or demotivated is less profitable than a happy, creative apprentice. Believe me – I learned that the hard way."

Juliette smiled for the first time that day.

"Thank you. I already feel better."

"Good. Now take your break. Go outside, breathe some fresh air. And when you come back, we'll try out some new designs inspired by your 'mistake'."

Juliette went outside and sat on a bench on the Grand-Rue. The multicoloured Alsatian façades reminded her why she loved Strasbourg. The spring breeze did her good.

She watched the passers-by: a lady with a pink poodle, a man in a suit eating a pretzel, tourists photographing the half-timbered houses.

So many possible inspirations, she thought. Chocolates shaped like pretzels, eggs decorated like Alsatian façades...

When she returned to the workshop, Juliette was brimming with new ideas. And for the first time in weeks, she was eager to work with chocolate again.

"Well?" asked Monsieur Weiss. "How are you feeling?"

"Ready to revolutionise Alsatian chocolate-making!" she replied with a laugh.

"Now that's the spirit I like to hear! But first, we finish the rabbits for Galeries Lafayette. With breaks, this time."

The egg with its stylised butterfly sat proudly on display, already catching the curious eyes of the afternoon customers. Sometimes, the most beautiful discoveries are born from the most difficult moments.

Comprehension Check

1. Where does Juliette work?

- a) In a bakery b) In a chocolate shop in Strasbourg c) In a hotel d) In a pastry school

2. Why is this particular period especially difficult?

- a) It's summer b) Easter is coming up c) There's a strike d) The owner is ill

3. What mistake does Juliette make?

- a) She breaks an egg b) She burns the chocolate c) She ruins the decoration on an egg d) She arrives late

4. How does Monsieur Weiss turn the mistake around?

- a) He throws the egg away b) He scolds her c) He turns it into a stylised butterfly d) He asks Juliette to start again

5. What new rules does Monsieur Weiss introduce?

- a) More working hours b) Mandatory breaks and a Sunday rest day c) A pay cut d) More orders

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.c, 4.c, 5.b

8. The Password

Madame Bertrand was staring at her laptop with a mixture of frustration and despair. Seated in her cosy Lille living room, surrounded by antique furniture, she gazed at the screen that stubbornly demanded the password for her WiFi connection.

How could something be this complicated? she thought. Forty years ago, to make a phone call, you just picked up the handset and that was it!

At seventy-two, Madame Bertrand was discovering the digital world with apprehension. Her daughter Claire, who now lived in Bordeaux, had given her this computer so they could stay in touch more easily. But for the past week, she'd been unable to get online.

"Wretched thing!" she grumbled.

A knock at the door interrupted her. She went to open it and found Lucas, her young neighbour from the fourth floor. Seventeen years old, tousled hair, headphones around his neck and a smartphone in hand.

"Hello, Madame Bertrand! Am I disturbing you?"

"Not at all, Lucas. Come in!"

The young man stepped into the cosy apartment. Madame Bertrand liked Lucas. Unlike the other teenagers in the building, he was polite and helpful.

"I was coming to say hello. And... he hesitated, I heard some swear words through the partition wall. Is everything all right?"

Madame Bertrand went slightly red.

"Oh, these walls are thin! It's this computer driving me mad!"

She pointed to the device lying open on the living room table.

"I can't get on the internet. It's asking for a password I've forgotten."

Lucas came over and looked at the screen.

"That's the password for your internet box. Did you write it down somewhere?"

"Write it down? Of course! But where? I've searched everywhere – the drawers, the address book, even the fridge!"

Lucas smiled kindly.

"Let's find it together. First, let's look on your box. The password is often printed on it."

They went to the kitchen where the internet box was kept. Lucas tilted his head to read the label stuck on the back.

"There it is! WiFi: LilleMaison2023. Password: BertrandClaire72."

"Oh!" exclaimed Madame Bertrand. "Of course! Bertrand is my surname, Claire is my daughter, and 72 is my age!"

"Exactly. Your son-in-law or your daughter chose a password that would be easy for you to remember."

They went back to the living room. Lucas picked up the keyboard and carefully typed in the password. The computer made a small sound and the WiFi icon lit up green.

"There you are! You're connected!"

Madame Bertrand clapped her hands like a child.

"Wonderful! How can I thank you?"

"It's nothing!" replied Lucas with a laugh. "But if you like, I can teach you a few tricks to get the most out of this computer."

Madame Bertrand hesitated. She didn't want to take up the young man's time.

"Haven't you got better things to do on a Sunday afternoon? Going out with friends, playing video games?"

"Actually, I like video games, but I also like helping people. And besides, you remind me of my gran – she struggles with technology too."

Struggles? Madame Bertrand didn't know that expression, but she understood the meaning.

"All right! But in that case, I'll make us a snack. Coffee and homemade waffles?"

"With pleasure!"

Over the following hour, Lucas patiently introduced Madame Bertrand to the mysteries of the internet. He showed her how to send an email to her daughter, how to check the weather, how to watch cooking videos on YouTube.

"Incredible!" marvelled Madame Bertrand. "You can really find anything on there?"

"Almost anything! Here, look..."

Lucas opened a recipe site and searched for "traditional Flemish waffles".

"Oh! That's exactly my mother's recipe! How is that possible?"

"People share their family recipes online. Isn't it wonderful?"

Madame Bertrand was fascinated. She who had thought the internet was dangerous and complicated was discovering a world of possibilities.

"And to talk to Claire? She lives so far away..."

"We'll install Skype. You'll be able to see her and talk to her for free!"

Half an hour later, Madame Bertrand was calling her daughter from Lille. When Claire's smiling face appeared on the screen, Madame Bertrand's eyes filled with tears of joy.

"Maman! It works! You did it!"

"Thanks to Lucas, my young teacher!"

Claire waved to Lucas through the screen.

"Thank you so much! Maman always talked about you. She says you're the kindest boy in the building."

Lucas beamed with pleasure.

After the call, Madame Bertrand made more waffles to thank her young helper.

"Lucas," she said, pouring the coffee, "I have a proposal for you."

"What is it?"

"How would you feel about coming every Sunday for my 'computer lessons'? In exchange, I'll feed you and tell you stories about the Lille of the old days."

Lucas thought for a moment. His weekends had often felt empty since his parents had divorced. The idea of spending time with this endearing woman appealed to him.

"Deal! But on one condition: you teach me your waffle recipe!"

"It's a promise!"

They clinked their coffee cups together.

"By the way," asked Madame Bertrand, "how do you manage computers so well?"

"Oh, it's my generation. We grew up with them. But you know what? You learn very fast! In a few months, you'll be an expert."

"An expert!" repeated Madame Bertrand with a laugh. "At my age!"

"Age has nothing to do with it. My gran is eighty-four and she beats everyone at Candy Crush!"

That image made Madame Bertrand burst out laughing.

Outside, Lille was lighting up for the evening. In the small, cosy living room, an intergenerational friendship had just been born – nourished by a teenager's patience and one determined woman's curiosity about the modern world.

In the end, thought Madame Bertrand, looking at her now-familiar screen, maybe technology isn't so frightening when you have a good guide.

Comprehension Check

1. How old is Madame Bertrand?

- a) Sixty-two b) Seventy-two c) Eighty d) Fifty-two

2. Why can't she connect to the internet?

- a) The computer is broken b) She has forgotten her WiFi password c) There is no electricity d) Lucas has cut the connection

3. Where does Lucas find the password?

- a) In a notebook b) On the fridge c) On the internet box d) In the computer

4. What does Skype allow Madame Bertrand to do?

- a) Send emails b) Watch videos c) See and speak to her daughter d) Check the weather

5. What arrangement do they come up with?

- a) Lucas does odd jobs in exchange for money b) Computer lessons in exchange for waffles and stories c) Madame Bertrand buys a new computer d) Lucas moves in with Madame Bertrand

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.c, 4.c, 5.b

9. The Day of the Visit

Étienne woke up with a start. Today is the day of the visit. Monsieur Dubois, his landlord, is coming to inspect the apartment at two in the afternoon. Étienne looks at the clock: it's already eleven in the morning.

The apartment is in a terrible state. Books are strewn across the sofa, dirty dishes are piling up in the sink, and a heap of laundry is waiting on the kitchen chair. Étienne sighs deeply. He has to clean everything before the landlord arrives.

He starts with the kitchen. While putting things away in the cupboards, he finds an old empty tea tin he had forgotten about. Inside, he discovers photos from his first months in Reims. In one of them, he's smiling with his former flatmates in front of the cathedral. *How quickly time passes*, he thinks.

Étienne continues tidying the living room. He vacuums and dusts the furniture. Under the sofa, he finds a French cookery book his grandmother had given him. He opens it and reads a handwritten inscription: "For my dear grandson – may these recipes always bring home to mind. Grand-maman."

Étienne's eyes grow moist. He had completely forgotten this gift. His grandmother died last year, and he has never used the book. He leafs through the yellowed pages and sees notes written in the margins: tips for improving the recipes, ingredient substitutions.

In the bedroom, Étienne makes the bed and puts his clothes away. Emptying a drawer, he finds a postcard from Marseille that his best friend had sent him two years ago. On the back, he reads: "I miss you, mate. Reims is lucky to have you!"

Étienne sits down on the bed. He had planned to move to Lyon the following month for a new job. This apartment was only ever meant to be a temporary stop in his life. But now, surrounded by all these memories, he feels something different.

At precisely two o'clock, the doorbell rings. Monsieur Dubois comes in with his notepad and his glasses. He is a fifty-year-old man, always very meticulous.

"Hello, Étienne," he says, looking around. "The apartment seems to be in good shape."

"Thank you, Monsieur Dubois. I cleaned it this morning."

The landlord inspects each room methodically. He checks the taps, the electrical sockets, and the condition of the walls. Étienne follows him nervously.

"Everything seems to be in order," concludes Monsieur Dubois in the kitchen. "Are you really leaving next month?"

"Well..." replies Étienne, hesitating. "I'm not sure anymore."

Monsieur Dubois raises his eyebrows in surprise.

"You're changing your mind? You told me Lyon was waiting."

Étienne looks out of the window toward Reims Cathedral. The bells are striking three o'clock.

"It's complicated. While cleaning today, I came across things that remind me why I love this city. This morning, I wanted to leave. Now I'm wondering whether I should stay."

The landlord smiles and puts away his notepad.

"You know, Étienne, I've lived here my whole life. Reims has something special. People who leave often end up coming back."

After Monsieur Dubois's departure, Étienne sits in his clean living room. The cookery book is open on his lap. He reads a pot-au-feu recipe and imagines the smell that used to fill his grandmother's kitchen.

He picks up his phone and calls his friend in Marseille.

"Hey! Do you remember that postcard you sent me?"

"Of course! Why?"

"I just found it. You wrote that Reims was lucky to have me."

His friend laughs on the other end of the line.

"And now you're realising it's true?"

Étienne looks around him. The apartment is no longer just a temporary place. It has become a home, filled with memories and possibilities.

"Yes," he replies simply. "I think it is."

Comprehension Check

1. What time is Monsieur Dubois due to arrive?

a) At eleven o'clock b) At two o'clock c) At three o'clock d) At four o'clock

2. What does Étienne find in the empty tea tin?

a) Money b) Love letters c) Photos with his flatmates d) Recipes

3. Who wrote the inscription in the cookery book?

a) His mother b) His grandmother c) His friend d) His flatmate

4. Where had Étienne been planning to move?

a) To Marseille b) To Paris c) To Lyon d) To Toulouse

5. How does Étienne feel at the end of the story?

a) He definitely wants to leave b) He realises his apartment has become a home c) He is angry with the landlord d) He regrets having cleaned

Answers: 1.b, 2.c, 3.b, 4.c, 5.b

10. Her Name Is Marie

Every morning at exactly eight o'clock, Camille crosses Wilson Square in Toulouse. She goes to work always following the same route. And every morning, she hears the same melody rising from the central fountain.

A street musician sets up there every day with his guitar. He is a man in his thirties, with dark hair and green eyes. He always wears the same worn coat and a blue beret. Camille doesn't know his name, but she recognises his gentle voice singing classic French songs.

At first, Camille hurried along so as not to be late. But as the weeks went by, she began to slow down. The music captivates her. Sometimes she stops for a few seconds behind the other passers-by just to listen.

One Tuesday morning, Camille takes a two-euro coin out of her pocket and drops it into the open guitar case. The musician looks up and smiles at her. She blushes slightly and walks on quickly.

The next day, she does it again. This time, she dares to stay for a few minutes. The musician is singing "La Vie en Rose" by Édith Piaf. His voice rings out magnificently in the cool morning air. Camille closes her eyes for a moment and lets herself be carried along by the melody.

On Thursday morning, Camille makes a decision. She writes a short note on a scrap of paper: "Your music brightens up my mornings. Thank you." She folds the paper and slips it discreetly into the case along with her coin.

The musician finds the note a few minutes later. He reads it, smiles, and looks up at the crowd passing by. But Camille is already gone.

On Friday, Camille leaves another message: "Do you know 'Autumn Leaves'? I'd love to hear it." The following Monday, when she arrives at Wilson Square, the musician is playing exactly that song. Camille stops, surprised. He spotted her and gives her a wink.

Days pass. Camille continues to leave little notes – compliments about his music, song requests, sometimes just "Have a good day!" The musician always reads them with pleasure.

On a rainy Wednesday morning, Camille finds something new in the case. A small piece of paper folded in four with her name written on it: "For the lady with the messages." She opens it nervously.

"Thank you for your kind words. They warm my heart more than the sun. My name is Antoine. And yours?"

Camille smiles as she reads the message. She quickly writes her reply on another piece of paper: "My name is Marie." She lies without knowing why. Perhaps because she wants to remain mysterious, or perhaps because Marie seems more romantic to her than Camille.

On Thursday, Antoine has written: "Hello Marie. Your name is as beautiful as your generosity. Thank you for making my mornings special."

Camille... or rather 'Marie'... blushes reading these words. She replies: "It's you who makes my mornings magical, Antoine."

The exchange of messages becomes a habit. Antoine tells her about his passion for music, his dreams of playing in great concert halls. Marie (Camille) shares her thoughts on art, her favourite books, her weekend strolls around Toulouse.

One day, Antoine writes: "Marie, I'd like to actually meet you. Not just through these little notes. Would you agree to have a coffee with me on Saturday?"

Camille freezes as she reads the message. She realises she has created a complicated situation. How can she admit that she lied about her name? And above all, is she ready to shatter the beautiful illusion they have built together?

She finally writes: "I'd love to, Antoine. But first, I have something important to tell you. My real name isn't Marie. It's Camille. I was afraid to tell the truth at first. Can you forgive me?"

The following morning, Camille anxiously awaits Antoine's reply. In the case, she finds a new message: "Dear Camille, your name is even lovelier than Marie. And your honesty moves me. Saturday, 2pm, Café des Arts, rue de Metz?"

Camille writes her last reply: "Yes, with pleasure. See you Saturday, Antoine."

That Friday, heading off to work, Camille hears Antoine singing "La Vie en Rose" with even more passion than usual. She stops and listens carefully. For the first time, she is no longer just an anonymous face in the crowd. On Saturday, she will finally have a face to go with the voice that has brightened her mornings for months.

Comprehension Check

1. What time does Camille cross Wilson Square each morning?

- a) At seven o'clock b) At eight o'clock c) At nine o'clock d) At ten o'clock

2. What does the street musician always wear?

- a) A red hat and a black jacket b) A blue beret and a worn coat c) A green cap and a jumper d) A white scarf and a blouson

3. What false name does Camille give the musician?

- a) Sophie b) Claire c) Marie d) Julie

4. Which song does Antoine play when Camille requests it?

- a) "La Marseillaise" b) "Autumn Leaves" c) "Frère Jacques" d) "Champs-Élysées"

5. Where does Antoine suggest meeting Camille?

- a) Wilson Square b) Café des Arts c) The town hall park d) The public library

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.c, 4.b, 5.b

11. The Café Across the Street

For six months, Julien has been working from home in his apartment in Grenoble. His desk faces the window, and from there he can see the café "Chez Margot" across the street. Every day he observes the same routine: the opening at seven in the morning, the first customers arriving, the regulars taking their coffee at the counter.

Julien now knows all the faces. There's Claude, the retiree who reads his newspaper every morning at the same table by the window. Sophie, the saleswoman from the neighbouring shop, who has a croissant and a café au lait around half past eight. And Margot, the owner – a sixty-year-old woman with grey hair who welcomes every customer with a smile.

At first, Julien looked out of the window out of idle distraction. Then it became a break in his working day. He would get up, stretch, and watch the life of the café. He imagined the conversations, the stories of each person. Was Claude talking about politics? Was Sophie complaining about her difficult customers?

One Monday morning, Julien notices something strange. The café seems empty, but Margot is sitting alone at a table with her head in her hands. She looks sad. Julien frowns. Normally, Margot is always active, always moving.

Tuesday, the same scene. Margot is sitting motionless while the café remains almost deserted. Julien begins to worry. Where are all the regulars? Why is the café so quiet?

Wednesday, Julien can't stand it any longer. He has to know what's going on. He closes his computer, puts on his shoes, and crosses the street for the first time since he's been living in this apartment.

He pushes open the door of the café and hears the little bell that announces his arrival. The interior is warm and inviting: yellow walls, vintage posters, red leather bench seats. But the atmosphere is strange. There are only two customers: a man reading a book and a woman typing on her laptop.

Margot looks up and smiles at him, but her smile looks forced.

"Hello! What can I get you?"

"A coffee, please."

Julien sits down at the table by the window – exactly where he had imagined sitting for months. From there, he can see his own apartment and his office window. *How strange to see your own home from the outside*, he thinks.

Margot brings the coffee and lingers for a moment.

"Do you live in the neighbourhood? I've never seen you before."

"Yes, just across the street. In the white building."

"Oh! You must be the man from the window!" she says, with a genuine smile this time.

Julien startles.

"What do you mean?"

"I often see you at your desk. You're always looking in our direction. At first, I thought you were keeping watch on the café!"

Julien goes red.

"No, no! It's just that... your café always looks so lively, normally. But these last few days, I noticed it was quieter."

Margot's face darkens.

"Ah, you noticed. We're going through a difficult period. The city hall wants to demolish this block of buildings to put in a car park. People are starting to go elsewhere, afraid we might close soon."

Julien's eyes go wide.

"But that's terrible! This café is part of the neighbourhood!"

"We're fighting, but it's complicated. The procedures, the lawyers... It's exhausting."

Julien thinks for a moment.

"You know, for six months I've been watching you. Your café is the heart of this neighbourhood. Claude comes every morning, Sophie has breakfast here... You create connections between people."

Margot sits down across from him.

"Thank you for saying that. Sometimes I feel like I'm fighting alone."

"What if we organised something? A petition? An event to raise awareness?"

Margot's eyes light up.

"You'd do that?"

"Of course! I have time, and... I want to help you. This café deserves to exist."

They spend the next hour discussing ideas. Julien suggests using social media to mobilise the neighbourhood. Margot tells the history of the café, opened by her parents forty years ago.

When Julien goes home, he feels energised. For the first time in months, he has a project that excites him. He opens his computer and starts creating a Facebook page: "Save Café Margot!"

The following day, Julien looks out of his window with different eyes. It's no longer just a spectacle to observe. It's his community, and he is now a part of it.

He sees Margot getting ready to open. She glances up toward his window and waves. Julien waves back and smiles. His world has just grown a little larger.

Comprehension Check

1. How long has Julien been working from home?

- a) Three months b) Six months c) One year d) Two years

2. What does Margot call Julien when she recognises him?

- a) The gentleman from the office b) The curious neighbour c) The man from the window d) The man who watches

3. Why is the café going through a difficult period?

- a) Margot is ill b) There are no more customers c) The city hall wants to demolish the block d) The prices are too high

4. What does Julien offer to do to help the café?

- a) Lend money to Margot b) Organise a petition and use social media c) Buy the café d) Talk to the mayor

5. What does Julien create at the end of the story?

- a) A website b) A poster c) A Facebook page d) A local newspaper

Answers: 1.b, 2.c, 3.c, 4.b, 5.c

12. The Delivery Error

Léa rings the doorbell of apartment 4B with a parcel under her arm. She has lived at 4A for two years, but she has never really spoken to her neighbour across the hall. She only knows that his name is Thomas and that he works late at night – she can often hear his typewriter.

"Hello!" she says when Thomas opens the door. "This was delivered to me by mistake this morning."

Thomas looks at the label on the package: "Thomas Moreau, 4B". That is indeed his name and his address.

"Thank you very much!" he replies, taking the parcel. "That's very kind of you."

"Not at all. Oh, by the way – I'm Léa."

"Thomas. Pleased to meet you."

Léa notices that Thomas looks tired. He's wearing striped pyjamas and his hair is dishevelled.

"Did I wake you? I'm sorry!"

"No, no! I was working. I'm writing a book and I sometimes lose track of time."

"Ah! So that's what the typewriter is! I sometimes hear typing at night."

Thomas goes slightly red.

"I hope it doesn't bother you too much?"

"Not at all! On the contrary – it's reassuring. It gives me the feeling that I'm not alone in the building."

Three days later, Léa finds a package in front of her door with her name on it. But when she opens it, inside are batteries for a vintage camera she doesn't own. She checks the label: "Léa Dubois, 4A." That is her name, but she hasn't ordered anything.

She knocks on Thomas's door.

"Excuse me, Thomas. I think there's been another mix-up with the deliveries."

Thomas examines the package.

"These batteries are for me. I collect vintage cameras. But why is your name on the label?"

"No idea. The delivery person must have made a mistake when printing the label."

"What a coincidence! Two errors in three days between next-door neighbours."

Léa shrugs.

"Maybe the universe is trying to tell us something!"

Thomas bursts out laughing.

"Do you believe in fate?"

"Sometimes. Do you?"

"As a writer, I like to think that everything happens for a reason."

The following morning, Léa discovers yet another misaddressed parcel. This time it's a box of organic tea ordered by Thomas but delivered to her. Looking at the label more closely, she notices that the address for the delivery company's customer service is on their very street.

In the afternoon, she and Thomas go together to the company's office. They want to understand why there have been so many errors.

"Ah!" exclaims the customer service employee, consulting her computer. "I can see the problem! Your names are registered in our system with the same confirmation email address: learmoreau@email.com."

Léa and Thomas look at each other, puzzled.

"But that's not either of our email addresses!" says Léa.

"Mine is thomas.moreau@email.com," specifies Thomas.

"And mine is lea.dubois@email.com."

The employee frowns and types on her keyboard.

"That's strange. This address was created recently, and it combines both your names: Léa Moreau. Someone must have made a data entry error when merging your information."

On the way back, Léa and Thomas burst out laughing.

"Léa Moreau!" says Thomas. "It sounds like a character from a novel!"

"Or a secret identity!" adds Léa.

"You know what? If I ever write a book with a heroine in it, I'll call her Léa Moreau. In your honour."

"Only if she's brave and intelligent!"

"Obviously!"

Back in the building, they go up the stairs together. On the landing, Thomas hesitates for a moment.

"Léa... would you like to have dinner with me this evening? To celebrate our mysterious digital connection?"

Léa smiles.

"With pleasure! But on one condition: you show me your camera collection."

"Deal!"

Later that evening, over an impromptu dinner, Léa discovers Thomas's passion for vintage photography and his manuscripts full of captivating stories. Thomas learns that Léa is a graphic designer who loves creating book covers.

"You know," says Thomas, showing her his latest novel, "I'd need a cover for this one."

"And I'd need a good book to read this weekend."

They raise their glasses of wine.

"To the most productive delivery error in history!" says Léa.

"And to our future collaboration!" replies Thomas.

Looking out of Thomas's apartment window, Léa realises they have the same view over the rooftops of Dijon. All this time, they had been contemplating the same landscape without knowing it.

Comprehension Check

1. How long have Léa and Thomas been neighbours?

a) Six months b) One year c) Two years d) Three years

2. What is Thomas's profession?

a) Photographer b) Writer c) Graphic designer d) Delivery driver

3. What is the fictional email address created by mistake?

a) thomas.lea@email.com b) voisins@email.com c) learmoreau@email.com d) erreur@email.com

4. What does Thomas collect?

a) Old books b) Vintage cameras c) Typewriters d) Stamps

5. What is Léa's profession?

a) Writer b) Photographer c) Graphic designer d) Post office employee

Answers: 1.c, 2.b, 3.c, 4.b, 5.c

13. A Sunday with Grandma

Hugo parks his car outside the retirement home in Angers. He has come to visit his grandmother Simone every Sunday since she moved in. Today, as always, he has brought fresh croissants from the local bakery.

"Hello, Grandma!" he says, kissing her wrinkled cheek.

"Hugo! What a surprise! I wasn't expecting you today."

Hugo sighs inwardly. Simone sometimes forgets that he comes every Sunday. The staff have explained to him that it's normal at her age.

"I brought your favourite croissants."

Simone's eyes light up.

"How thoughtful of you! Let's sit in the common room – it's less noisy in there."

In the lounge, other residents are watching television or playing cards. Hugo and Simone settle into two comfortable armchairs by the window.

"So, tell me. How's work?" asks Simone, biting into her croissant.

"Going well, Grandma. I'm still in computing – I develop phone apps."

"Apps? Like WhatsApp?"

Hugo smiles. His grandmother has never quite mastered technology, but she does try to understand.

"Yes, exactly like WhatsApp! And you're getting better and better at using it, I must say."

"I sent a voice message to your cousin yesterday! She was surprised to hear my voice."

They eat while watching the news on television. The presenter is talking about regional elections.

"Pfff!" says Simone, shaking her head. "All these politicians look the same. In my day, we had real leaders."

Hugo raises an eyebrow.

"Grandma, you always voted right-wing, didn't you?"

"Think again! I voted left for forty years! It was your grandfather who was on the right."

Hugo is speechless. He had always assumed his grandparents shared the same political views.

"Really? But you never argued!"

"We debated! That's different. Your grandfather was conservative, I was progressive. It made our conversations more interesting."

The presenter now begins talking about social media and TikTok.

"By the way," says Simone casually, "I created a TikTok account last week."

Hugo nearly chokes on his coffee.

"You? On TikTok? Grandma, you're eighty-six!"

"And? Age is just a number! That young care assistant – Manon – showed me how to do it. I've already posted three videos!"

Hugo takes out his phone, incredulous.

"What's your name on TikTok?"

"Mamie_Simone_86. The 86 is for my age!"

Hugo types in the name and finds his grandmother's account. She does indeed have three videos: one in which she shows how to fold sheets, another in which she critiques the food at the retirement home, and a third in which she dances to a popular song.

"Grandma! Your dance video has three thousand views!"

"I know! The comments are very kind. A lot of young people say I remind them of their grandmother."

Hugo looks at his grandmother with admiration. She's wearing her usual purple cardigan and her glasses on their gold chain, but suddenly she seems to him incredibly modern.

"You amaze me, Grandma."

"Why? Because I don't stay stuck in the past?"

"No, it's just... you always surprise me."

Simone pats Hugo's arm affectionately.

"My dear, I've lived through the war, the economic boom years, the technological revolutions... I've learned to adapt. That's the secret to staying young."

In the afternoon, they stroll in the retirement home's garden. Simone greets all the gardeners by first name and asks after their families.

"You know them all?" asks Hugo.

"Of course! They look after our environment. Respect goes both ways."

On their way back to the lounge, they run into Manon, the care assistant who helped Simone with TikTok.

"Hello, Simone! How's your account doing? Did you see? Your last video passed five thousand views!"

"Fantastic! I'm already preparing the next one. I'm going to explain how we used to make preserves in the 1950s."

Hugo listens to his grandmother chatting with Manon about strategies to gain more followers. He realises he had been completely underestimating Simone.

When he leaves that evening, Hugo kisses his grandmother.

"See you next Sunday, Grandma!"

"Don't forget to subscribe to my TikTok!" she says with a wink.

In his car, Hugo reflects on this surprising day. He had always seen his grandmother as a fragile elderly person who needed protection. But today he discovers a woman who is curious, adaptable, and full of vitality.

He picks up his phone and subscribes to Simone's TikTok account. Then he writes a comment under her latest video: "Proud to be your grandson, Mamie_Simone_86!



Comprehension Check

1. What does Hugo do every Sunday?

a) He goes to the cinema b) He visits his grandmother c) He works d) He does sport

2. How old is Simone?

a) Eighty b) Eighty-five c) Eighty-six d) Ninety

3. What political discovery surprises Hugo?

a) His grandmother doesn't vote b) His grandmother votes right-wing c) His grandmother has always voted left-wing d) His grandmother hates politics

4. What is Simone's TikTok username?

a) Grand-mère_Simone b) Mamie_Simone_86 c) Simone_TikTok d) Simone_86_ans

5. Who helped Simone create her TikTok account?

a) Hugo b) Another resident c) Manon, the care assistant d) Her cousin

Answers: 1.b, 2.c, 3.c, 4.b, 5.c

14. The Queue

It is six in the morning in Bordeaux and a queue is already forming outside the "Pain d'Or" bakery. Today, François the baker is launching a limited-edition batch of pistachio and white chocolate croissants. He's only making fifty, and word has spread throughout the neighbourhood.

Marie arrives first. She's a retired teacher who has lived on the street for forty years. She brings a folding chair and a thermos of coffee.

"Clever!" says Vincent, the second to arrive. "I didn't think of the chair."

Vincent is a computer scientist who works from home. He's still wearing his pyjamas under his coat.

"You too – you've gone mad for the new croissants?" asks Marie.

"My wife sent me. She's pregnant and has strange cravings at the moment."

Behind them comes Sophie, a twenty-two-year-old law student, followed by Monsieur Dubois, a meticulous accountant who checks the time on his watch every two minutes.

"It's only quarter past six," says Sophie, yawning. "The bakery opens at seven!"

"Better to be early," replies Monsieur Dubois. "These croissants are going to sell like hot cakes!"

Marie chuckles at the joke.

The queue continues to grow. Next comes Fatima, a nurse finishing her night shift, then Lucas, a secondary school student who's skipping his first class to be there.

"You're going to be in trouble with your parents!" says Vincent to Lucas.

"It's worth it! I saw the photos on Instagram. Those croissants look incredible!"

Around half past six, tension mounts. The queue now has fifteen people in it, and everyone is calculating their chances of getting a croissant.

"How many is François actually making?" asks Sophie.

"Fifty," replies Marie with authority. "I have it on good authority – his wife told me yesterday."

"Phew!" sighs Monsieur Dubois. "We're well within the first fifty."

Suddenly, a car stops outside the bakery. A man in a suit gets out and heads toward the entrance.

"Hey!" shouts Lucas. "There's a queue!"

The man turns around, surprised.

"I only want to buy some regular bread..."

"The bakery's closed!" says Sophie. "It opens at seven!"

The man looks at the queue curiously.

"Are you all waiting for croissants?"

"Not just any croissants!" explains Fatima. "A limited edition!"

The man shakes his head and walks away.

"People are going mad about food these days," he mutters.

Conversation picks back up in the queue. Marie talks about her memories of the neighbourhood, when there was only one bakery and no supermarkets.

"In the old days, we queued for bread every day," she says. "But it was sociable. We chatted, we exchanged news."

"It still is today!" points out Vincent. "Look at us!"

Around a quarter to seven, François switches on his bakery lights. Everyone in the queue straightens up. The excitement is palpable.

"He's getting ready to open!" whispers Sophie.

Monsieur Dubois takes a ten-euro note from his wallet and holds it ready.

"How much are they?" asks Lucas, worried.

"Three euros fifty each," replies Marie.

"Oops!" says Lucas. "I've only got five euros."

Vincent rummages in his pockets and hands two euros to Lucas.

"Here. You can pay me back later."

"Thanks! That's really kind!"

At exactly seven o'clock, François opens the door. A delicious smell of fresh pastries drifts out of the bakery.

"Good morning!" says François with a broad smile. "So, who wants to try my new creations?"

The queue moves forward calmly. Each person orders their croissant carefully, as if it were a treasure.

When it's Marie's turn, François says:

"For you, Madame Marie, it's on the house! You're my first customer this morning."

Marie blushes with pleasure.

Monsieur Dubois examines his croissant from every angle before biting into it. His eyes close with happiness.

"Extraordinary!" he says. "The texture is perfect!"

Sophie immediately takes a photo for Instagram. Vincent sends a message to his wife: "Mission accomplished!"

Lucas savours every bite of his croissant, partly paid for by Vincent's generosity.

"This is the best croissant of my life!" he says.

Fatima, exhausted after her night shift, smiles as she savours her reward.

Outside, the former members of the queue gather on the pavement. No one is in a rush to leave.

"You know," says Sophie, "it wasn't just about the croissants."

"What do you mean?" asks Vincent.

"The wait was nice. We got to know each other."

Marie nods in agreement.

"In our hurried society, we no longer take the time to talk to each other. This queue gave us an excuse."

Monsieur Dubois, usually so serious, admits:

"I have to say, I had a good time. Even waiting!"

As they say their goodbyes, they exchange phone numbers. Lucas promises to pay Vincent back. Sophie invites everyone to follow her Instagram account.

"Until the next limited edition!" says Fatima with a laugh.

Comprehension Check

1. What time does the queue start forming?

- a) Five in the morning b) Six in the morning c) Seven in the morning d) Eight in the morning

2. How many croissants does François prepare?

- a) Forty b) Fifty c) Sixty d) One hundred

3. Who arrives first in the queue?

- a) Vincent b) Sophie c) Marie d) Lucas

4. Why does Vincent help Lucas?

- a) Lucas doesn't have enough money b) Lucas is his friend c) Lucas is ill d) Lucas has forgotten his wallet

5. What do people do after buying their croissants?

- a) They go straight home b) They gather on the pavement c) They go back into the bakery d) They head off to work

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.c, 4.a, 5.b

15. Off Season

September arrives in Biarritz, and with it, the great departure of tourists. Maxime watches from the terrace of the "Les Vagues Bleues" hotel as the last families fold away their parasols and pack up their beach things. In a few hours, the Atlantic coast will return to its winter calm.

Maxime has been working as a receptionist at this hotel since May. His seasonal contract officially ends tomorrow, but he has decided to stay on. The owner, Monsieur Laroche, has offered him a part-time maintenance position for the winter.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" asks Céline, his colleague, as she packs her suitcase. "I'm heading back to Paris. Biarritz off-season is depressing!"

Maxime shrugs.

"I want to see what it's like. And besides, the flat I'm renting here costs three times less in winter."

"As you wish! But you'll get bored!"

After Céline leaves, Maxime does a tour of the empty hotel. Eighty vacant rooms, a covered pool, a restaurant closed until next spring. Only a few ground-floor rooms remain open for the rare passing guests.

The following morning, Maxime walks along the Grande Plage. Gone are the colourful parasols, the deck chairs, the shouts of children. The beach is vast and silent. Only a few early joggers and dog owners walk along the sand.

It's beautiful, thinks Maxime. Why do people say it's depressing?

He sits on a rock and watches the waves crash with more force than in summer. The ocean has reclaimed its wild grey-green colour, free of the holidaymakers' buoys and surfboards.

On the way back toward the town centre, Maxime discovers a Biarritz he didn't know. The souvenir shops have shut up, but the neighbourhood's real businesses are still open: Monsieur Espel's butcher's, Madame Durand's pharmacy, Pierre's café.

At "Chez Pierre", Maxime orders a hot chocolate. There are only three customers: two retirees playing cards and a woman reading the newspaper.

"Didn't you leave with the other seasonal workers?" asks Pierre, wiping a glass.

"No, I'm staying for the winter."

"Wise choice!" says Pierre. "This is when you discover the real Biarritz."

Days pass. Maxime establishes a new routine. In the morning, he works at the hotel — cleaning, minor repairs, garden maintenance. In the afternoon, he explores the region.

He discovers the coastal paths that tourists never find, secret coves only accessible at low tide. He visits the villages of the Basque hinterland: Espelette with its dried peppers, Ainhoa with its traditional houses.

One rainy Wednesday, Maxime pushes open the door of the public library. He had never been inside during the tourist season.

"Hello!" says the librarian, surprised. "A new reader!"

Maxime registers and borrows three books about the history of the region. He learns that Biarritz was a simple fishing village before it became the seaside resort favoured by Empress Eugénie.

At the weekend, Maxime goes cycling along the clifftop road. He sometimes passes other cyclists, often locals who – like him – are rediscovering their region in the off-season.

"Do you live here?" a woman in her fifties asks him, stopping nearby.

"Since September, yes. I work at the Hôtel Les Vagues Bleues."

"I'm Isabelle. I've lived in Biarritz my whole life. In summer, I flee the crowds! Autumn is my favourite season."

They chat, looking out at the ocean. Isabelle tells him local legends, the best spots to watch the sunset, the little restaurants that stay open in winter.

"Are you coming to the market on Saturday? It's more authentic now. Only local producers – no T-shirt sellers!"

On Saturday, Maxime goes to the covered market. Isabelle was right: a warm atmosphere, local produce, conversations among regulars. He buys sheep's cheese, Bayonne ham, and seasonal vegetables.

"Still not depressed?" calls out Pierre from the café when he sees him walking past.

"Not at all!" replies Maxime with a smile.

October sets in. The days grow shorter, but Maxime never gets bored. He has joined a hiking club, signed up for Euskera classes (the Basque language), and volunteers at the library.

One evening, watching the sunset from Plage du Port-Vieux, Maxime reflects on the last two months. He misses Paris sometimes – his friends too. But he has found something here that he wasn't expecting: a sense of calm that allows him to reconnect with himself.

His phone buzzes. It's a message from Céline: "Still alive in Biarritz? Not getting too bored?"

Maxime types his reply: "Alive and thriving! I've discovered a different way of living. How about you – how's the Parisian rat race?"

He puts his phone away and continues watching the ocean. Tomorrow, he'll go back to his morning walks, his quiet work at the hotel, his reading at the library. A simple life, paced by the tides and the seasons.

In the end, he thinks, off-season doesn't mean out of life. It might even be the opposite.

Comprehension Check

1. What was Maxime's job during the summer?

- a) Tour guide b) Receptionist c) Waiter d) Holiday rep

2. Why does Maxime decide to stay in Biarritz for the winter?

- a) He doesn't have the money to leave b) He wants to discover the town in the off-season c) He has a girlfriend there d) He hates Paris

3. What does Maxime discover at the public library?

- a) Crime novels b) Books about the history of the region c) Travel guides d) Magazines

4. Who does he meet while cycling?

- a) Céline b) Pierre c) Isabelle d) Monsieur Laroche

5. What does Maxime sign up for in order to integrate into the community?

- a) A tennis club and English classes b) A hiking club and Euskera classes c) A book club and cookery classes d) A swimming club and guitar lessons

Answers: 1.b, 2.b, 3.b, 4.c, 5.b

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