

La Comédi@thèque

Running **on Empty**



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Running on Empty

English translation by Anne-Christine Gasc

A journalist visits a playwright on the down and out for an interview that could launch his comeback. But in the world of theatre, appearances can be deceiving...

Characters

Author

Visitor

A messy living room. A man (or a woman) dozes in an armchair. The phone rings, partially waking him. He answers the phone, still half asleep.

Author (*unfriendly*) – Hello? (*Without listening*) You better not be calling to tell me the meeting is cancelled! (*Waking a little*) Building Society? (*More pleasant*) Oh sorry, no it's because I'm expecting a journalist for an interview you see, and... Yes, a small overdraft, I know, it's on my statement... Large? Let's call it medium then... potayto, potahto... Don't worry about it, it's being taken care of... I received an advance for my next play and the cheque's in the mail, and... Yes, a play. Do you like the theatre?... No, of course that's not the question... Listen, you're breaking up... Oh, there's someone at the door, it must be the journalist... Of course, I'll call you right back... Oh dear, now I can't hear you at all, I'm afraid... I'm hanging up now...

The author hangs up and sighs. He is waking up slowly, still a little dozy, and gets out of the chair. His demeanour and his clothes are unkempt. The doorbell actually rings. He hesitates a little. Looks in a mirror, adjusts his clothes and runs a comb through his hair. The doorbell rings again.

Author – Yes, all right, I'm coming...

He goes to the door and returns followed by a woman (or a man) that is younger, dressed more fashionably, and generally fitter and much better looking than him.

Visitor – Thank you for having me, Mr Tellerman.

Author – Letterman.

A little taken aback by the mess.

Visitor – Pardon?

Author – Not Tellerman. Letterman. Charles Letterman. That's my name. How do you not even know that?

Visitor – Of course, I'm sorry. A pen name, naturally?

Author – No, why?

Visitor – Oh, I... Letterman for a writer... Never mind, let's just say it was fate, then.

Author – I don't need a pen name... If I want a best seller, I'll just call my book "Late Night with"...

Visitor – Right... (*Looking at the author with concern*) I didn't wake you, did I?

Author – Wake me? Of course not! What makes you say that?

Visitor – Er, I don't know, I...

Author – Actually, what time is it?

Visitor – I'm sorry, I don't have a watch.

Author – Well, that would explain your tardiness.

Visitor – Tardiness? But... you don't even know what time it is...

Author – Typical journalist... always have to have the last word. So, are we going to do this interview or not? I haven't got all day, unlike some.

Visitor (*muttering to herself*) – If you say so...

Author – Pardon?

Visitor – Nothing, I was just saying... Yes, let's start! That's what we're here for, right?

Author – Actually, you're very lucky. I never give interviews.

Visitor – Do you get asked often?

Author – Not as often as they used to, it's true... but back when they used to ask me, I would refuse them all.

Visitor – Yeah, right...

Author – Are you implying that it's easy to play hard to get when no one is after you?

Visitor – Not at all... I mean, yes but... That's not what I was trying to...

Author – What were you "trying to", then?

Visitor – No, nothing...

Author – Yes, you did! You said: that's not what I was trying to... So that means you were "trying to" something!

Visitor – I misspoke, that's all.

Author – A journalist who misspeaks... This is going well.

Visitor – I apologise.

Author – Then why did you ask me that question?

Visitor – What question?

Author – You asked me if I did a lot of interviews.

Visitor – I don't know... I'm here to ask questions... That's how interviews work, isn't it?

Author – Real questions, yes... Not asinine ones.

Visitor – I think you mean journalist questions.

Author – I hate journalists...

Visitor – Yes, famous people tend to hate journalists...

Author – I wonder why...

Visitor – Even though it's often journalists that brings them fame in the first place.

Author – That depends on your point of view.

Visitor – From the point of view of a journalist.

Author – Famous people sell papers.

Visitor – Absolutely, the role of a newspaper is also to talk about famous people... so they don't fall into oblivion...

Author – Did you come see me to talk about the entertainment industry or to ask questions about my work?

Visitor – Don't worry, I'm getting there. (*Looking around the room*) May I sit down?

Author – Please...

Visitor – Thank you...

She sits. Awkward silence. He collects himself a little.

Author – I'm sorry, we started on the wrong foot.

Visitor – It's quite all right...

Author – I'm not really used to being around people any more. I've become quite the anti-social ogre, I'm afraid...

Visitor – Please, there's no need to apologise... It's quite a normal reaction... After all I just turned up on your doorstep...

Author – What would you like?

Visitor – Thank you... I was hoping to get some answers.

Author – I meant something to drink.

Visitor – Oh yes, sorry... Er... I wouldn't turn down a coffee.

Author – I'm out of coffee. Well, I have coffee but I don't have a coffee maker anymore. It's broken... Happened a while back, actually. For several months I managed by boiling water in a saucepan and making coffee filters out of tissues. But then I ran out of Kleenex and decided it was an opportunity to reduce my caffeine intake.

Visitor – That's all right, no worries.

Author – I can make you a herbal if you like. Chamomile? But I'm out of sugar.

Visitor – Tempting, but no thank you... I'll pass.

Author – Ok, well in that case... I'm all yours...

Visitor – Thank you. My first question is... do you write with a pen or on a computer?

The author is taken aback for a few seconds.

Author – I'm sorry... I didn't quite get that. Which paper did you say you work for?

Visitor – Well... Actually... It's not technically a paper. I mean, not a paper on paper, like *The New Yorker*.

Author – *The New Yorker*?

Visitor – It's more like... a digital medium, as they say.

Author – I see... you mean a website...

Visitor – More like... a web magazine. *Living Theatre*.

Author – Living Theatre?

Visitor – That's the name of the magazine. You don't like it?

Author – It's fine... It sounds like a magazine for OAPs... On the other hand, only retirees go to the theatre anymore...

Visitor – Whatever...

Author – Living Theatre... Unfortunately, very few people still manage to make a living from the theatre, you know...

Visitor – That's why our website strives to highlight the work of contemporary playwrights. This interview would allow our readers to get to know you better. As a playwright anyway...

Author – I see. And... your first question is whether I write with a pen or on a computer?

Visitor – That's right.

Author – I'm sure the answer is keeping your readers on the edge of their seats.

Visitor – So?

Author – So? So as you can probably guess from my age, when I started my career I used a pen. Printing had only just been invented a few years earlier, so computers wouldn't be around for a while yet.

Visitor – Of course.

Author – I remember it well... It was a Mont Blanc fountain pen given to me by my godmother for my first communion. With a gold nib. I was very fond of it.

Visitor – I see. Like a sort of... transitional object.

Author – That's it... A replacement for a mother if you prefer. You know, writing is a form of psychoanalysis.

Visitor – Of course...

Author – It's just as useless but instead of spending money, there's always the chance that you can earn some. In theory, anyway.

Visitor – I see...

Author – I know what you're thinking... Given the state I'm in, you're thinking my therapy sessions might not have been as successful as I'd hoped...

Visitor – No, not at all...

Author – Would you say I look fulfilled?

Visitor – Fulfilled isn't the first word that comes to mind, but... So what happened next?

Author – Next, the fountain pen broke.

Visitor – Like the coffee maker.

Author – Exactly. And with the royalties from my first play I bought a typewriter, like the ones you see in old black and white films. Have you seen *Sunset Boulevard*?

Visitor – Yes, maybe, well... A long time ago, I think...

Author – Unfortunately I wasn't able to find an ageing film star to support me in exchange for writing them a comeback script.

Visitor – I love it, it sounds like a novel... Do you still have the typewriter?

Author – It ended up broken, too.

Visitor – Shame...

Author – So I replaced it with one of the very first electric typewriters... It was a revolution at the time, you know? It had a small screen, like on a computer, with room for only a couple of lines. You could make a few changes before the machine typed the text. It meant you could save quite a bit of ink and paper. I used it for a few years, and then...

Visitor – The electric typewriter broke, and you got a Mac.

Author – No, it was me who was broken, so I hired someone to ghost for me.

Visitor – A ghost?

Author – He's the one who used the computer. At first I would dictate a little, naturally, but then very quickly he started writing on his own.

Visitor – The computer?

Author – The ghost-writer!

Visitor – Oh?

Author – He was very gifted, you know.

Visitor – I see.

Author – You’ve heard Buffon’s quote: “style is the man himself”.

Visitor – Yes... no

Author – Well that ghost-writer was totally my style.

Visitor – Oh yes.

Author – He was Swedish.

Visitor – Who was?

Author – The ghost-writer!

Visitor – Oh right, sorry...

Author – You ask me a question and... I have the feeling you’re not that interested in my answers.

Visitor – Oh no, I am! Very much so, but... this ghost, do you still have it?

Author – Unfortunately not. That’s why I haven’t written anything for years...

Visitor – Maybe he went back to Sweden.

Author – No... He died.

Visitor – Blimey... I mean... It’s such a strange story.

Author – Yes, and I was very fond of him, too. But what can you do? He was starting to think he was a writer. I had to get rid of him.

Visitor – Get rid of him?

Author – A daily dose of arsenic in his chamomile. He died like Madame Bovary.

Visitor – I see...

Author – It’s just like Flaubert wrote: “Madame Bovary, c’est moi”. Well, a little part of me died with Antonio that day.

Visitor – Antonio?

Author – My Swedish ghost-writer! After he left us, I lost my style for good, never recovered.

Visitor – That’s when you stopped writing.

Author – Correct... I never finished my 124th play.

Visitor – I’m very sorry to hear this.

Author – I went through a very difficult phase. To try and recapture the inspiration from my early days I bought myself another Mont Blanc pen, with the last of my savings.

Visitor – But it wasn't enough...

Author – I was on the verge of committing suicide... I didn't even have enough money to buy cartridges.

Visitor – For your shotgun...

Author – For the fountain pen!

Visitor – Of course...

Author – I found an old syringe from when I was a heroin addict. I would draw blood every morning and fill the pen. A client had commissioned a comedy but blood-red ink is more conducive to writing noir fiction (*Noticing the journalist's astonishment*) Shouldn't you be taking notes?

Visitor – Yes, yes, I have everything here... (*She pulls out a small recorder.*) But maybe you want this off the record...

Author – So you actually believe all the bullshit I just told you?

The visitor realises the writer has been taking the piss.

Visitor – Of course not, it's a joke, I knew that. Pretty funny, too... A Swedish ghost... I didn't know you were a comedy writer.

Author – That must be why they sent a comedy journalist to interview me... Still no to chamomile?

Visitor – With or without arsenic?

The visitor starts a forced laugh, then stops.

Author (*very serious*) – Next question.

Visitor – Yes, I... I loved your last play. Have you written anything since then?

Author – Pardon?

Visitor – I mean... on your own, not with your Swedish ghost. (*She laughs again at her own joke.*) Just kidding.

But the author still isn't laughing.

Author – I have written 123 plays.

Visitor – 123! That's quite the number. And... what are they about?

Author (*scandalised*) – What are they about? You come here to talk about my work and you haven't read my plays?

Visitor – Not all 123, obviously, but...

Author – And how many have you read, precisely?

Visitor – I'd say... One... The first one... Well, the first pages anyway. This assignment came very late... I am filling in for a journalist from *Living Theatre* who killed himself yesterday.

Author – How many pages?

Visitor – To be totally honest... I didn't have the time to read beyond page 5.

Author – The text of the play starts on page 6.

Visitor – I really liked the title...

Author – Oh, you did, did you? (*Ironically*) And what was the title of my first play? I'm drawing a blank right now.

Visitor – I can't remember either, but I remember I loved it.

Author – Can I see your credentials?

Visitor – Er... Yes... (*She goes through the motion of looking through her bag*) Actually... I wonder if...

Author – You're not a journalist...

She hesitates a moment before answering.

Visitor – No.

Author – I see. You've come to burgle me, is that it? It's very common, apparently. The burglar pretends to be from the gas company or whatnot, and they leave with the cash that was hidden under the mattress. It's called theft by deception, I believe.

Visitor – Deception?

Author – You're right, that doesn't fit... You aren't clever enough to pull off deception. And you wouldn't have chosen to impersonate a journalist anyway.

Visitor – Actually, I...

Author – Let's see... You would have been more convincing as a pizza delivery guy.

Visitor – That's true...

Author – Now, if you've come here looking for money... We can look together if you want?

Visitor – I'm an actress.

Author – If you came here looking for a role, you're even more fucking stupid than I thought. And believe me, I had set the bar quite high.

Visitor – It's the first time I play a journalist. And I didn't have a lot of time to prepare for the role.

Author – Let's not exclude the possibility that you are a mediocre actress just yet. So? Who is the director of this bad comedy?

Visitor – Your agent.

Author – My agent? I didn't know I still had one...

Visitor – He thought an interview would be a good way to puff up your ego and get you back to the writing desk.

Author – He's even more fucking stupid than I thought, too.

Visitor – Everyone knows you aren't writing any more... He's been waiting for your next manuscript for almost a year.

Author – What can I say? I have severe writer's block. Do you know what that's like? It's like forgetting lines for an actor. You never know when it's going to happen, or how you're going to get yourself out of it.

Visitor – But a year... that's a long time to forget your lines...

Author – You haven't read the first of my 123 comedies, but you're going to beg me to write a 124th?

Visitor – Personally, I couldn't care less. But it sounds really important to your agent. Enough that he gave me a hundred pounds to set up this little comedy.

Author – A hundred pounds? I hadn't realised I was worth that much to my agent.

A time.

Visitor – Right, so what do we do?

Author – What do you mean, what do we do?

Visitor – I am not a journalist. Now that the cat is out of the bag, I don't think you'll want to continue the interview.

Author – Why? Do you have any more riveting questions to ask about my work? I don't know... How about... Whether I wear y-fronts or boxer shorts? Do I put the jam or the cream first? Marmite hater or Marmite lover? Do I bat for the other team?

Visitor – Right, I get the message, you don't want to play along. So what do I tell him?

Author – Who?

Visitor – George, your agent!

Author – That's your problem. Tell him whatever you want.

Visitor – It's just that... He was going to give me another hundred pounds after the interview.

Author – I see... Half up front and half on delivery... so he actually thought you could deliver...

Visitor (*showing him the recorder*) – I was supposed to bring him the tape.

Author – Don't tell me you actually want to go through this interview thing?

Visitor – We could share.

Author – Share? Share what?

Visitor – A hundred pounds each.

Author – Unbelievable. You're really something else...

Visitor – No, I'm just hungry. And from what your agent told me, you're not raking it in either. You're not writing. Your plays aren't being produced.

Author – Thank you for the subtle reminder.

The visitor gives the room a deprecating look.

Visitor – I don't know... you could use the money to freshen up the paint...

Author – If you know a painter who'll do that for a hundred pounds, even cash-in-hand, please give me his number.

Visitor – A hundred pounds will get you a few pots of paint and a roller.

Author – And who is going to use this roller? You?

Visitor – Why not? For a fee, obviously...

Author – Enough! Don't you get it? You don't have to be an optimist to write comedies, but you do have to believe that taking the piss out of assholes might just lead some of them to become better people.

Visitor – You're just feeling sorry for yourself...

Author – You think?

Visitor – Come on... Writing plays isn't the end of the world... there are worse jobs, don't you think?

Author – Yes, probably...

Visitor – Probably? Do you know there are people who get up every morning to press themselves against strangers' sweaty bodies in the tube for an hour, and work the till at Morrison's, and all for minimum wage?

Author – And it's to avoid such an ordeal that you chose a career in apartment theatre?

Visitor – I take what I'm offered... and my agent hasn't given me any big roles yet.

Author – He must be as shit as mine. Who is it?

Visitor – Same as you.

Author – I see... (*A time*) You know what, maybe you're right. Even with the IQ of a barnacle you're better equipped than me to survive in this world.

Visitor – Thank you...

Author – I think therefore I am... Descartes is an idiot. What a load of crap. It's obvious that in order to survive in this world of shit, the first thing to do is stop thinking.

Visitor – Yes...

Author – But here's the rub... Not thinking is like quitting smoking. It's a lot easier to do when you never started.

Visitor – Are you saying for that me? Because I don't smoke...

Author – Actually, now that I think about it... I might have a small job for you.

Visitor – Oh? Why not, if it's my range.

Author – No, let's not look at it that way, it would reduce the realm of possibilities to barely nothing.

Visitor – So?

Author – Would you consider working as my ghost-writer?

Visitor – Pardon?

Author – For reasons I don't understand, my agent is determined that I should write a new play. You could write it for me.

Visitor – But... I'm not a playwright.

Author – Just between us, you're not an actress either.

Visitor – Well... that's a matter of opinion... Ghost-writer... How much does it pay?

Visitor – That is directly related to the reputation of the author who signs the work.

Visitor – That doesn't sound very attractive... You were never very well known... and according to your agent, no one remembers you anymore.

Author – And you said he paid you to lift my spirits...

Visitor – I'm just realistic, that's all.

Author – So, are you interested or not?

The doorbell rings.

Visitor – If you're expecting someone I should probably leave.

Author – I'm not expecting anyone.

He goes to open the door. The visitor starts to pack her recording device and put on her raincoat. The author returns with an open envelope in one hand and a piece of paper in the other.

Author – It was a courier.

Visitor – I'll leave you to it...

Author (*with authority*) – Sit down!

Surprised, she sits without a word. The author examines the paper he is holding, confused.

Visitor – What it is? Your gas bill?

Author – Gas bill? They cut off the gas a long time ago... If they hadn't I don't know whether I'd still be here talking to you.

Visitor – So?

Author – It's from my agent, a contract for an exclusive deal for my next play.

Visitor – A contract?

Author – He wants me to sign it and return it immediately. This is really strange. (*He pulls a cheque from the envelope.*) There's even an advance...

Visitor – How much?

Author – Five hundred.

Visitor – Five hundred pounds! He's not kidding.

Author – I don't know... I'm not sure... Since your arrival it's become difficult to tell who's been led...

Visitor – Well, now that you received this advance you don't have a choice anymore. You're going to have to write this comedy.

Author – I can always return the cheque. I haven't signed the contract. I imagine this fake interview was a ploy to convince me to go along with this scheme.

Visitor – You're not going to sign it?

Author – I can't write under duress... But this pile of unpaid bills over there demands that I take a little longer to think about it, because if I want to kill myself in a painless way I'm going to need the gas to be turned back on.

Visitor – And what about my two hundred pounds?

Author – Didn't we agree to share them?

Visitor – But now that you've a working author again, getting commissions and everything... you don't want to look cheap.

Author – Not so fast. I still have to find the subject of the comedy.

Visitor – Come on, for five hundred quid even I could write anything.

The author looks at the visitor.

Author – How about two hundred and fifty?

Visitor – What about two hundred and fifty?

Author – Half of five hundred! You haven't rejected my offer yet either.

Visitor – What offer?

Author – To work as my ghost-writer.

Visitor – Oh, hold on, I was joking. I said I could write anything, but not a play. Certainly not a masterpiece.

Author – Write anything? But that's exactly what I need you to do.

Visitor – Pardon?

Author – To be completely honest with you, the only thing I can write are masterpieces. Writing just anything, I don't know how. That's the problem, do you understand? (*A time*) Looking at your moronic face, I don't think you do...

Visitor – Well, it's just that...

Author – Ok... My agent paid me an advance to write a play but, alas, I have lost the inspiration needed to write a real one. With me so far?

Visitor – I think so.

Author – I could write anything and still earn this cheque, like any other playwright would do, but unfortunately, I am unable to write just anything.

Visitor – How so?

Author – Most likely some good old Judaeo-Christian guilt... And my agent knows it perfectly well. He's Jewish.

Visitor – So?

Author – So for you, writing just anything is right up your street!

Visitor – You think?

Author – Take it from me... you're a natural.

Visitor – But why not hire a ghost who can actually write?

Author – If I could get one for two hundred and fifty pounds I would have hired one a long time ago.

Visitor – Sure...

Author – Sure? That means you'll do it?

Visitor – No... Sure means, yes I understand...

Author – So?

Visitor – So... I could really write just anything?

Author – What else could you write?

Visitor – But your agent, I mean our agent, he'll be able to tell it's a load of crap!

Author – My agent? My agent setup this absurd comedy to trick me into writing one after I told him I wasn't going to. I see it as paying him back in kind.

Visitor – He's more likely to see it as a kind of payback.

Author – See, you can even be funny when you try! So, what do you think?

Visitor – Maybe... What's the worse that could happen?

Author – Getting egg on your face?

Visitor – I can live with that.

Author – Yes, I'm sure you've had plenty of practice.

Visitor – Ok... So when do you want me to start? Let me see... (*She pulls out a day planner and starts flipping pages.*) This week's all booked up... Maybe if I can free some time... How about next Monday?

The author rips the diary out of her hands and quickly glances at it.

Author – There's so many white pages in this diary you could use it to write the play. Ah, my bad... you have an eye doctor's appointment in three months.

Visitor – They have a very long waiting list. (*The author looks at her impatiently*) Ok... so when do you want to start?

Author – No better time than the present, and since you're already here...

The phone rings. The author doesn't move.

Visitor – You're not going to get that?

Author – It's probably the bank, wanting to chat about my overdraft.

Visitor – I see... We must have the same bank.

Author – The Coop Building Society.

Visitor – The only thing they're building is an increasing number of overdrafts.

We hear the voice of the person leaving a message.

Voice – Hello, this is Quentin Hustlewell-Swindlelots, president of the Critics Sphere Awards. It is my pleasure to let you know that our foundation has decided to award

you this year's lifetime achievement prize. Please call us back at your earliest convenience so we can work out the details of the ceremony.

The author listens to the message with visible astonishment.

Visitor – Do you think this is another joke from your agent?

Author – It's not out of the question...

Visitor – What else could it be?

Author – Is it that far fetched to think I am actually the recipient of a lifetime achievement award?

Visitor – How should I know... I haven't read any of your plays...

Author – It's a shame you're not really a journalist. You missed a scoop. You would have been the first to interview the latest Critics Sphere Awards winner.

Visitor – Sorry, never heard of them...

Author – You've never heard of them? But this award is to comedy writers what the Pulitzer prize is to journalists!

Visitor – Never heard of that either...

Author – Oh, that's right, you're not a journalist. Let's see... it's like a Bafta for an actor.

Visitor – Oh, you mean... like a literary Nobel Prize?

Author – Let's not get carried away.

Visitor – Yeah, I didn't think so...

Author – Let's just say that, combined with the right cover this award could nicely boost the sales of my next play.

Visitor – Even if the play isn't very good?

Author – Even with your lack of domain expertise, you couldn't have failed to notice that the biggest literary successes are rarely masterpieces. Most of the time the books aren't written by their authors, even much less read.

Visitor – Yeah... but usually, while the authors are morons, those who actually write the books are real authors.

Author – Well, in our case it'll be the other way around.

Visitor – It's not very ethical to do that to your agent.

Author – I don't think you quite get the situation.

Visitor – What do you mean?

Author – This crook knew before I did that I was going to win the award, so he sent me a contract to sign immediately that would grant him exclusive rights to my next play. And for a paltry five hundred pounds! When he knew damn well that the kind of publicity the award would draw would turn me into a successful author. What were you saying about ethics again?

Visitor – I have to say, when it comes to ethics... I don't have that much experience.

Author – And don't get me started on this ridiculous interview scenario to convince me to get back to work.

Visitor – When you look at it that way...

Author – So, are you going to write the play or not?

The visitor thinks for a moment.

Visitor – All right... but I also want the two hundred pounds for the interview.

Author – I thought we agreed to share.

Visitor – You said so yourself: you're now a successful author.

Author – All right. Get to work, then.

Visitor – I'll have that chamomile now, I think...

Author – To be honest, I don't recommend it... I keep it next to the arsenic... but if you want a writer's tip, I can recommend something else. (*He pulls a bottle of whiskey and puts it on the table*) That right here is the magic potion that conjures up inspiration. Unfortunately, I built up a tolerance...

Visitor – Why not...

She pours herself a glass, downs it in one, and pulls a face. She looks at the label.

Visitor – Swedish whiskey? Are you trying to poison me too?

Author – Not before you've finished writing this play. (*He hands her a pen.*) You are now the official curator of my Mont Blanc pen. May the force be with you. There's paper on the table. Sit down and write.

She sits.

Visitor – I'm not sure I can write a whole book, even writing just anything...

Author – It's just a play! Fifty pages and we can fool anyone.

Visitor – Fifty pages?

Author – Think of it as sitting your A Levels and you're writing a rather long essay...

She looks at him, embarrassed.

Visitor – A Levels...?

Author – You don't have any A Levels. Of course you don't.

Visitor – I could have gotten them, but I missed my train.

Author – Look at it like a very long letter then.

Visitor – I mostly write tweets...

Author – A play is all dialogue! You start a new line at the end of each sentence, and you skip a line every time. Half of what makes a play is what's in between the lines... It's mostly blank paper!

Visitor – That must be why they call you Letterman...

Author – There you go, we'll write this play with four hands: I'll give you the letters and you put them in the correct order.

Visitor – And you sign the whole thing.

Author – Do you think Michael Angelo painted all the pictures he signed? He had staff, too. He just added a few details at the end.

Visitor – Still, I'm not a writer.

Author – But everyone can be a writer! And a playwright even more so. It's so easy they don't even have degrees for it. It's one of the few jobs, along with pizza delivery and psychoanalyst that you can't get a degree in. Actually, I'm not sure about pizza delivery, you need to drive a moped.

Visitor – But it's still a lot of work.

Author – You can write a play with a single cartridge. For a novel, you'd need four or five.

Visitor – Ok...

Author – It's the world's laziest job, take my word for it. Unless you count poets. Wankers write five lines of three words each on a page and lots of space around and they're geniuses.

Visitor – Maybe I should be ghost-writing for a poet then.

Author – Good luck with that. There isn't a universe where poets can afford to pay ghost-writers, even in instalments.

Visitor – All right... I'm not sure where to start though...

Author – The beginning is always the hardest, of course. Especially in comedy.

Visitor – Oh, we're writing a comedy.

Author – Yes, a boulevard comedy. Or maybe just a high street comedy.

Visitor – Funny... I still can't picture you as a comedy writer.

Author – It was a long time ago. Why do you think I need a ghost-writer now?

Visitor – I don't know if I can be funny.

Author – I don't expect you to be intentionally funny. We're aiming for natural comedy...

Visitor – That's not helping.

Author – Let's see... Is there someone you'd like to kill?

Visitor – Kill?

Author – That's the point of comedies! It's illegal to kill your mother-in-law, so you write a play where you roast her.

Visitor – I'm not married. Do you have in-laws?

Author – Not any more, unfortunately. My wife left me. Some days I find myself almost missing my in-laws, that's how depressed I am. How am I supposed to write a good comedy in these conditions?

Visitor – I don't know... Let me think... Oh, right... I used to hate my sister.

Author – Good, that's a start...

Visitor – Unfortunately she died... I'm guessing that as far as comedies go...

Author – It depends, some deaths can be hilarious. What did your sister die of?

Visitor – Cancer.

Author – I see. No... That's not going to work, I'm afraid. It's very difficult to joke about cancer. Especially when it affects a family member.

Visitor – Oh, really? Crap... That's unfortunate...

Author – It's one of those subjects that are incompatible with comedy. I'm not sure why. Maybe it's the part about the long illness. On stage, the funniest deaths are always the quickest. If a man talks about his wife getting hit by a train on her way back from her pilates class, everyone's laughing and he hasn't even finished the story. If he talks about how she died of colon cancer after three years of chemo, no one's laughing. Go figure.

Visitor – Ok...

Author – Having said that, if you want to give it a try...

The doorbell rings.

Visitor – You're expecting someone else?

Author – It must be the courier guy. He said he'd come back for the signed contract. Can I have that pen?

He takes the contract.

Visitor (*worried*) – Are you sure?

Author – I don't know why but I believe in you... (*He signs the contract and hands her the pen.*) If you feel an idea coming on while I talk to the courier guy, don't wait for me, just start writing.

He leaves the room. The visitor's mobile phone rings and she takes the call.

Visitor – Yes... No, I'm still with him... Yes, yes don't worry, he just signed the contract... Listen, I can't talk now... Ok, I'll call you back...

She puts her phone away. The author returns.

Author – Right... So now we can't turn back. I just sold your soul to the devil for five hundred pounds. Even in your wildest dreams you wouldn't get such a good deal.

Visitor – There's nothing to brag about... I thought you had a stronger moral fiber...

Author – You know, most authors only write so they can pay last year's taxes with the advances they get for the books they'll write next year. If authors are ever made to join Pay As You Earn, there's going to be a whole lot less books written.

Visitor – I wouldn't know, I've never earned enough to pay taxes.

Author – Lucky you... Taxes are a downward spiral, stay out of the system as long as you can. Where were we?

Visitor – Nowhere, I'm afraid.

Author – Yes, that's what I feared.

Visitor – What if we wrote the story of a writer with severe writer's block?

Author – I see... And then this bird knocks at his door, and she pretends to be a journalist...

Visitor – Why not?

Author – Theatre in theatre... I swore I would never fall that low...

Visitor – But you said we could write anything!

Author – I did... And how would it end?

Visitor – I don't know... I'm not even sure where it goes after that...

Author – Have another glass...

He does as he says and pours her another whisky.

Visitor – I don't know if...

Author – Bottoms up!

She downs the shot.

Visitor – I think I'll take a quick nap. I'm sure ideas will come to me more easily while I'm asleep.

Author – Oi! I'm not paying you to sleep!

Visitor – You haven't paid me anything yet... Actually, speaking of payment, a small advance might motivate me...

Author – Even if I wanted to, I doubt the Coop Building Society would agree to increase my overdraft... My god, you're really no good as a ghost-writer! I told you to write anything and you can't even do that!

Visitor – I have a reputation too, you know! I don't want to become a laughing stock by publishing just anything...

Author – But no one will know your name! I will sign the book!

Visitor – That may be so, but I'll know who really wrote it. There is such a thing as self respect, you know.

Author – Fine. No one is stopping you from writing a masterpiece.

Visitor – You don't think I can? I'm not as stupid as you think I am.

Author – Go on then, surprise me...

Visitor – Yeah... But with all that whiskey you gave me, I'm getting peckish. Do you have anything to eat?

Author – I hired you to write, not to attend a cocktail party.

Visitor – You know what they say: hunger is poor counsellor.

The author finds a packet of biscuits and gives it to the visitor.

Author – Here, I have a few chocolate digestives left.

Visitor – Thank you. (*She starts to eat one.*) They're a little soft.

Author – Would you like me to drop everything to go to the shops and buy fresh ones?

Visitor – No, they'll do... (*She stuffs a second biscuit in her mouth.*) I have an idea!

Author (*jumping*) – You almost scared me...

Visitor – Boy loves girl, but their families hate each other.

Author – That's *Romeo and Juliet*.

Visitor – Boy loves girl, but they both end up marrying other people.

Author – *Wuthering Heights*.

Visitor – I love that song.

Author – No, the book.

Visitor – It's a book?

Author – Indeed.

Visitor – Boy loves girl but it's really a man.

Author – *Some like it hot.*

Visitor – Never heard of this play.

Author – It's a film.

Visitor – Are you sure?

Author – Quite sure.

Visitor – A man loves another man but it's really a girl.

Author – *Victor Victoria.*

Visitor – A woman loves another woman but it's really a man.

Author – *Tootsie.*

Visitor – Bloody hell... I didn't think it would be so difficult to be a contemporary writer. Has everything already been written then...?

Author – Everything...

Visitor – All the good stories for sure...

Author – They stuffed their faces and now we're left with the crumbs.

Visitor – Mother fuckers.

Author – Shakespeare, Chekov... They had it easy... Nothing had been written then. Good ideas were just lying around for the picking. Anyone who could read and write was miles ahead of everyone else and had a pretty good shot at posterity.

Visitor – That's true. If there was room for another Shakespeare today we'd know about it.

Author – That's why I'm not even attempting to write a masterpiece, and I'm only asking you to just write anything.

A time.

Visitor – I'll take that whiskey in the end.

She drinks it thirstily straight from the bottle.

Author – Maybe you should slow down a little...

She sighs satisfactorily as she puts the bottle down.

Visitor – I got it!

Author – Really?

Visitor – Let's see you link that one to Christopher Marlowe or George Bernard Shaw.

Author – I'm all ears.

Visitor – A couple are having a friend over for dinner whose husband just died in a plane crash. And while they're consoling her, they find out they won the lottery.

Author – Excellent! Bravo...

Visitor – See, when I try.

Author – That's my first play.

Visitor – Oh yes...

Author – The one you haven't read.

Visitor – Great minds and all that...

Author – Indeed, had you been born before me you could have been the one to write it. It's actually my most popular play...

Visitor – I must have read about it in *Time Out*.

Author – I stopped writing the day I started to plagiarise myself.

The enthusiasm dies down. A time.

Visitor – Any more chocolate digestives left?

Author – You scoffed them all!

Visitor – The paquet was already opened. I'd rather not know for how long, either. I hope I don't get food poisoning.

Author – If you do, just call in sick. But you do realise that us authors don't get sick leave... when we don't work we don't get paid. So for ghost-writers, imagine...

Visitor – Whatever. I'm still hungry.

Author – You're obsessed with food, aren't you?

Visitor – Only someone who has never really known hunger would say something like that.

Author – All right, I'll go and see if I can find something in the fridge...

Visitor – One more thing...

Author – What now?

Visitor – I don't like this word... ghost-writer.

Author – You don't?

Visitor – I find it offensive.

Author – Offensive? For who?

Visitor – For me!

Author – So what do you want to be called? Stand-in writer? Famous actors have stand-ins for the scenes they don't want to shoot. Authors could have stand-ins for the scenes they don't want to write...

Visitor – I don't know... How about... personal assistant?

Author – Personal assistant?

Visitor – When we're out and about and you have to introduce me, you can't very well say, and this is my ghost.

Author – I have to admit... I hadn't considered the possibility of us going out together...

Visitor – In any case... I need a cover, don't I?

Author – A cover?

Visitor – Speaking of cover... A ghost-writer who moonlights... that's not very legit. I'd like to be able to claim benefits. I have to think of my future.

Author – But of course, and what about pension contributions while you're at it?

Visitor – Fine... Let's start with personal assistant.

Author – Right. And in lieu of pension contributions I'll go and see if there's a piece of cheddar in the fridge.

He is about to leave the room when the phone rings. The visitor picks up, to the author's surprise.

Visitor – This is the office of Charles Letterman. How can I help you?

The author signals that he doesn't want to take the call.

Visitor – Oh, I'm sorry, he can't come to the phone at the moment... Why? Well... because he's dead. Yes, pretty sure. The doctor was just here, and believe me, it's not a pretty sight. Oh yes? No... Yes, yes of course, it's good news, but... in that case it will have to be posthumously. Listen, I'm sorry but I have to go, the autopsy is about to start... And the same to you.

The author stands frozen, stunned.

Author – Who was it?

Visitor – John Frowner, president of Subsidised Starving Playwrights. Apparently, you're being considered for an O.B.E. by the Ministry of Culture.

Author – And you told him I was dead?

Visitor – You didn't want to talk to him... It's the first thing that came to mind.

Author – I see...

Visitor – Oh come on, let's get real. I'm not going to write this play, and neither are you.

Author – So?

Visitor – So if you're dead, your agent won't come and ask you to pay back the five hundred pounds he gave you for a play you haven't written.

Author – But dead...? Isn't that a little... extreme to avoid paying back five hundred pounds?

Visitor – It's part of this plan I have...

Author – See, when you put your mind to it...

Visitor – Between your death, the award and now the O.B.E., you'll be famous again!

Author – I know I asked you to surprise me, but you've exceeded all expectations...

Visitor – Thank you.

Author – It wasn't meant as a compliment. There's more than one way to surprise people.

Visitor – Do you have any family?

Author – Only my wife. And I'm not sure she considers me family anymore.

Visitor – So basically you're alone. No wife, no family, no friends... This award and this medal, I could receive them in your name.

Author – But of course... I hire you as a ghost-writer, you can't write a single line, and now you want to receive all the awards I won. Do you want my pin code too?

Visitor – Actually, that might be best. After all, you're supposed to be dead.

Author – I could always come clean.

Visitor – Think about it. At the moment, you've got everything to gain by pretending to be dead.

Author – How do you figure?

Visitor – I bet that by tomorrow you'll be all over the papers. Probably not the front pages, let's be real. But all of a sudden, the *New Yorker* will remember who you are.

Author – Being able to read my own obituary in the papers... tempting.

Visitor – Everyone will say you were a great author. Your books will sell like hot cakes... maybe even until the end of the week.

Author – You think so?

Visitor – I may not be a journalist, but I'll still get you in the papers!

Author – Right, so what do we do now?

Visitor – You play dead, and... I'll take twenty per cent of your royalties.

Author – My agent only took ten!

Visitor – But with him you weren't selling anything, and your plays were never produced.

Author – And to think I was getting used to the idea of retiring.

Visitor – Retiring?

Author – I had already started to remove everything from my life that upset me. I don't write. I talk only when necessary. I don't share my opinions with anyone and I am working on not having any opinions at all.

Visitor – Do you really think you could do that?

Author – Not have any opinions?

Visitor – Retire! Are you sure you can afford it?

Author – According to the Coop Building Society, it seems it's debatable...

Visitor – What I'm offering is better than retirement, I am offering death!

Author – It's tempting for sure, but... If it's okay with you I think I'll take a few minutes to think about it first.

The phone rings again. The author is about to answer out of habit. The visitor stops him.

Visitor – Are you crazy! You're supposed to be dead, remember! (*She picks up.*) Hello? Yes. The Coop Building Society? No, I'm sorry, Mr Letterman has passed away. Yes. He took his own life. Yes, he killed himself... he drank a bottle of Drano... That's right, the stuff to unclog toilets. A huge hole in his stomach. Caustic soda. Yes, he could be very caustic too. Maybe that's why he chose to leave us in this manner... Why? Oh, who knows with artists... And as you're well placed to know, he was deeply in debt. It was the only way to avoid bankruptcy. Yes, of course there are things more important than money, I'm glad to hear you say that... In any case, thank you for calling... That's right. Good bye. Of course, I'll pass on your condolences to his family.

The visitor hangs up. The author looks at her, stunned.

Author – It takes a while to get you started, but once you're warm you're unstoppable! So now I committed suicide.

Visitor – I thought it would be more romantic for a writer, better than cardiac arrest or colon cancer.

Author – More romantic? A bottle of drain cleaner?

Visitor – I improvised... that's what came to mind.

Author – Improvised... From now on, please stick to the script!

Visitor – What script? You're unable to write anything!

Author – Oh all right... There's no need to be unpleasant... Ok, so I committed suicide... It's true I was feeling a little down recently.

Visitor – See?

Author – So what do we do now? Do we organise my state funeral?

Visitor – An author's death usually results in a 10% increase in sales, at least. For a suicide it can go up to 20%. (*The phone rings again.*) Sounds like we're in business.

Author – For sure... this phone hasn't rung that much in the past ten years... combined.

The Visitor picks up.

Visitor – This is the office of Mr Letterman. How can I help you? Yes, Madam, it is. I can confirm, your husband died this morning. Please accept my condolences, as well as those of the Coop Building Society. A bullet to the head, yes. Yes, if you saw him I'm not sure you would recognise him. Half the top of his head... It's not a pretty sight, believe me.... Very well, I'll let him know... I mean, yes, thank you... Good bye Madam. (*She hangs up.*) That was your wife.

Author – My wife? What did she want?

Visitor – Pay her respects, apparently.

Author – I haven't seen her in years. Ironically, she used to complain I wasn't showing her enough respect...

Visitor – The dead are always much more popular than the living. You'll see, there's only upsides to being dead.

Author – So now the story is that I shot myself in the head.

Visitor – I use every opportunity to improve.

The phone rings again.

Visitor – At this rate, we're going to need a receptionist. (*She picks up.*) This is Mr Letterman's beneficiary speaking, how can I help? Yes, that's right, I hold the rights to all his plays. We were married a few months before his death. That makes me his

only beneficiary... Yes... Yes... Yes... Yes, he just finished a play that will surprise you. I think it's a masterpiece, if I say so myself. It hasn't been seen by anyone yet, no. Yes... Yes... Yes... Of course. Where can I reach you? (*She scribbles something on a piece of paper.*) Very well, I'll take a look at your file myself and give you my answer as quickly as I can. Yes, speak soon.

Author – So now we're married...

Visitor – It's easier that way.

Author – Easier...?

Visitor – To explain how I came to hold the rights to your plays.

Author – Of course.

Visitor – And as your widow, it stays in the family.

Author – If you say so... And can I ask who that was?

Visitor – A theatre in London, asking about producing your last play.

Author – A theatre? Which theatre?

Visitor – I was going to write it down but you interrupted me... Something to do with EastEnders...

Author – EastEnders?

Visitor – And also something to do with being young...

Author – The Young Vic?

Visitor – That's the one!

Author – But they only put on plays by living playwrights!

Visitor – Your body's still warm, surely that's good enough?

Author – Right... So what are you planning to do?

Visitor – I'm going to let them stew a little. Let them think they're not the only ones interested.

Author – You should have been my agent...

Visitor – We could even consider a retrospective of your entire body of work, what do you think?

Author – Why not... But when you say my last play, do you mean...

Visitor – The one you haven't written yet.

Author – How does that work since I'm supposed to be dead?

Visitor – You heard, I told them you had a play no one had seen before.

Author – Yes... But I don't have one...

Visitor – But since you're not really dead, you can write it.

Author – But I told you I had writer's block!

Visitor – But that was before!

Author – Before? Before what?

Visitor – Before you became a successful writer again.

Author – You mean a dead writer.

Visitor – Yes, that too... Now that you have your whole death ahead of you, you'll have plenty of time to write this play. I'll handle everything else.

Author – I'm sorry to ask you this but... I'm going to stay dead for how long? Approximately?

Visitor – For now, let's say long enough for you to write this 124th play. Then we'll see.

The Author appears to be a little overwhelmed by the situation.

Author – Ok... So... Well... I'll get on it then...

Visitor – How about a cup of chamomile tea?

Author – I think I'll stick with Swedish whiskey... (*He takes the bottle and goes to leave the room.*) You're staying?

Visitor – Someone has to stay for the wake and answer the phone.

Author – Ok then...

The author leaves. The visitor makes herself at home, takes out her mobile phone and punches a number.

Visitor – George? It worked. I think he'll write the 124th play... Yes, maybe we've overdone it with the Critics Sphere Awards and the O.B.E... He's certainly going to be disappointed when he finds out he isn't getting either... It's for his own good... And you never know, if his new play really is good... Yes, of course, if he isn't dead first... Speaking of which, I wanted to tell you. I had to improvise a little...

The author returns and she hides the phone.

Author – I've run out.

Visitor – I'm sorry?

Author – I've run out of ink. My pen is empty. And good luck finding a Mont Blanc replacement cartridge at this hour...

Visitor – What about the typewriter?

Author – The typewriter? It’s like me, it’s running on empty.

The visitor takes a biro from her pocket and hands it to the author.

Visitor – Use this for now.

The author appears disappointed to see his excuse hasn’t worked. He leaves. She picks up the phone.

Visitor – This is going to be harder than I thought... I can’t leave him out of my sight so I think a small raise would...

We hear a bang.

Visitor – Oh... Sounds like he found his cartridges... I’ll call you back. (*She hangs up.*) Looks like I’m going to have to write this play myself after all.

The author returns carrying a champagne bottle, the popped cork in his other hand.

Author – I’m also out of whiskey, but look what I found in the fridge. I was saving it for a special occasion. Getting a prize and a medal in the same day, surely that qualifies... Will you have some?

Visitor – Why not? But only if you promise to get back to work right after.

Author – Oh no worries there. Learning I was dead gave me a new lease of life.

Visitor – That’s great to hear... So you have an idea?

Author – It’s always best to start from real life situations. So fuck principles and let’s go with theatre in theatre. It’s the story of an author with severe writer’s block. One day, a journalist comes to see him...

Visitor – Yes, that rings a bell... And for the title?

Author – How about... “Running on empty”?

Visitor – Hasn’t it been used before?

Author – What now? We have to come up with a unique title as well...?

Visitor – All right, let’s go with “Running on empty”

Author – I’ll dictate, you type. It’ll go faster that way. (*He places an old typewriter in front of the visitor.*) Here, I found a new ribbon.

Visitor – I’m listening...

The author starts to dictate, very inspired, as if he was visualising the scene.

Author – A messy living room. A man (or a woman) dozes in an armchair. The phone rings, partially waking him. He answers the phone, still half asleep. Hello?

Black.

End.

The author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and almost as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwright in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (comediatheque.net). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who want to read the texts or work from a traditional book format, a paper copy can be purchased from Amazon.

Other plays by the same author in English

Casket for two
Critical but stable
Friday the 13th
Him and Her
Strip Poker

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