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A Cuckoo's Nest



Jean-Pierre Martinez

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A Cuckoo's Nest

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

On the eve of Christmas, the unexpected return of a grandfather everyone thought was dead upends the routine of an apparently ordinary family. A wildly absurd, dark comedy about family ties. Go straight to hell... or draw a Chance card.

Characters
William
Judith
Fausto
Nina

A version of this play for one man and three women
is also available on the author's websites.

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Act 1

A living room opening onto a terrace. There are a few Christmas decorations, but no tree. Judith, in her forties or fifties, sits in an armchair reading a newspaper. The headline announces an eruption of an Icelandic volcano that has disrupted air traffic. Her husband, William, about the same age, tends a plant in a planter. He waters it, sprays it, trims it... When he runs out of things to do, he sits in another armchair. Silence. Between them stands a large, old-fashioned grandfather clock fitted with a cuckoo mechanism. It cuckoos three times.

William – The cuckoo always calls three times...

Judith – What time is it?

William – No idea. But it certainly isn't three o'clock.

Judith – We ought to have it repaired.

William – Or get rid of it. When's the next collection for bulky rubbish?

Judith – It's the only thing you've inherited from your family.

William – And it's still taking up too much space.

A pause.

William – Unbelievable weather for December.

Judith – An Indian summer.

William – Christmas on the terrace...

Judith – Just as well we weren't planning to travel today. Have you seen this? Every airport is shut.

William – We're back in the age of sailing ships. Nowadays a plane can't take off unless the wind is right.

Judith – All because of a volcano whose name nobody can pronounce.

William – Like the devil...

Judith – Sorry?

William – You're not supposed to say the devil's name either! That proves there's something diabolical about the whole business.

Judith – Oh, it's hardly the end of the world.

William – Maybe those doomsday prophets are right. What if the apocalypse really is coming on Christmas Day?

Judith – Because a volcano erupted?

William – That's how it started for the dinosaurs!

Judith – Never wake a sleeping volcano...

William – So what are we going to do now?

Judith – While we wait for the end of the world?

William – After our little bird has flown the nest...

Judith – There's a nest? Where?

William – It's a metaphor! I'm talking about Nina, our daughter. Once she's moved out, we'll be all alone in this house, with one bedroom too many.

Judith – She's not leaving forever. She's only moving to Paris. She'll be back.

William – Yes. In transit.

Judith – I'd rather not think about it. Not yet...

William – For more than twenty years, she's set the rhythm of our days. Everything has revolved around her. Has she eaten? What will she eat? What's she done? What's she going to do? Now we'll have to get used to the fact that our only child can feed herself and go to the toilet without our help.

Judith – We'll need new routines, new points of reference.

William – What did we do before she came along?

Judith – I can't remember.

William – We'll have to learn all over again.

Judith – But it can never be the way it was.

William – Then we'll have to invent something new.

Judith notices the planter.

Judith – Are you growing something?

William – Just a couple of cannabis plants. Strictly for personal use.

Judith – You're joking!

William – We said we needed to change our habits, didn't we? The occasional joint ought to help us forget the old ones. *(She stares at him.)* Relax, I'm joking. They're cherry tomatoes. I got the plant from the florist.

Judith – The florist? That's sweet of you, but you really shouldn't have. I hope you didn't spend a fortune...

William – Ten euros. I went in for a Christmas tree. But apparently cherry tomatoes can be incredibly productive. More productive than a fir tree, anyway. Have you seen the price of cherry tomatoes? They're almost as expensive as cannabis.

Judith – And perfectly legal...

William – If the bank really does make me redundant, I could always deal in cherry tomatoes.

Judith – Hmm...

William – I haven't harvested anything yet, mind you. I only bought it an hour ago.

Judith – And it is December.

They both remain silent for a moment.

William – The funny thing is, I can't tell whether I'm dreading being made redundant or hoping for it.

Judith – It could be a chance to evolve...

William – Or the beginning of the end. Like the dinosaurs. They didn't manage to evolve.

Judith – We have some savings. You'd get redundancy pay. And I have a job.

William – I know. That's what depresses me. Twenty years ago we had nothing, and nothing frightened us. Least of all the future. Now we've got a house, two cars, life insurance policies... Everything we could want. And we're terrified of everything. Even volcanoes. We've turned into dinosaurs, I tell you.

A pause.

Judith – You'd finally have time to write your novel. You've been talking about it for years. What was the title again?

William – Memoirs of an Amnesiac.

Judith – That's a good title.

William – Unfortunately, somebody's used it in the meantime.

Judith – What about Memoirs of a Dinosaur?

William – Taken too. All the good titles are taken. If only I'd been born a century earlier, I could have called my book In Search of Lost Time or Journey to the End of the Night. With titles like those, I'd have been a huge success.

Judith – Makes you wonder why anyone bothers writing...

William – Meanwhile, I'd better stick with the terrace farming. In case my redundancy package isn't quite what we'd hoped.

Judith – Are you really that worried?

William – Why do you think I bought a food crop instead of cannabis?

Judith – Because florists don't sell cannabis plants?

An appalling sound of someone playing the flute, punctuated by wrong notes.

William – What's that racket? It's unbearable! How am I supposed to write a prize-winning novel with that going on?

Judith – The neighbour's daughter. Nina used to learn the recorder at school too. Remember?

William – Of course. Incredible. Yesterday she was learning how to blow a recorder, and today she's supposed to be a lawyer. Come to think of it, she's still practising how to blow hot air...

Judith – As long as she can keep her clients out of jail.

William – Anyway, if they ever discover an illegal plantation on our terrace, we'll be able to call her the moment we're taken into custody. That's reassuring, isn't it?

Judith *(eyeing the plant suspiciously)* – You swear that's a cherry tomato plant?

Nina enters, pulling a wheeled suitcase. She is in her early twenties and has a sporty look.

William – So this is it? You're leaving us here, two old fossils, all on our own... At last we'll get some peace and quiet.

Nina – So will I.

William – We were just talking about you. I was telling your mother that if a body ever turns up buried in our garden, you can keep us out of trouble with the police.

Nina – You think so?

William – We paid for your education, after all!

Judith – Are you sure you don't want us to take you to Paris?

Nina – Really, Mum, there's no need. Gertrude's coming to pick me up.

William – Gertrude? Who's Gertrude?

Judith – Nina's... colleague. The one she's sharing a flat with. You know that.

William – No, I don't. Nobody tells me anything. How old is this Gertrude?

Nina – Why? Are you the police?

William – Gertrude? Do people still give girls names like that? I thought they were extinct.

Judith – Rents in Paris are so expensive... Are you sure you haven't forgotten anything?

Nina – If I've forgotten anything, I'll come back. It's not the end of the world.

William – Depending which side of Paris you're on, it can feel like the end of the world.

Nina *(to Judith)* – Shall I leave you my keys? For the cleaner...

William – Leave your keys at reception when you check out. And did you take anything from the minibar?

Judith – You really should write that book. If you put down all the nonsense you talk, it would run to several volumes.

The phone rings inside the house.

William – I'll get it. I'd rather miss the tearful farewell.

William leaves.

Nina – He looks utterly miserable...

Judith smiles.

Judith – His little girl is leaving home. Of course it makes him feel old...

Nina – I'm not leaving forever!

Judith *(close to tears)* – Yes, that's what I told him... You will come back, won't you?

Nina – Of course!

Nina embraces her mother to comfort her. A touching moment. Then they let go. Nina hands Judith a piece of paper.

Nina – Here. I've written down the address and the door code. Come whenever you like!

Judith – Thanks... *(She puts the paper in a drawer and takes out a revolver.)* Oh, by the way... I found this under your bed while I was dusting. You really shouldn't leave it lying about.

Nina – Sorry. I hid it so Dad wouldn't see it. I'm supposed to keep it with me at all times, even at home.

Judith – Give Gertrude a kiss from me...

Nina – Okay.

Judith – You'll have to tell your father the truth one day.

Nina – Tell him what?

Judith – That you passed the police entrance exam, not the one for the judiciary. Why didn't you tell him?

Nina – I thought he'd be disappointed. It was his last chance to see me in a gown, at least once in his life...

Judith – A job in the gendarmerie is respectable too.

Nina – I'm with the police, Mum. Not the gendarmerie.

Nina moves to retrieve the revolver, but stops when she sees the cherry tomato plant.

Nina – What's this?

Judith – Your father's little plantation. Cherry tomatoes...

Nina (*not convinced*) – Oh, yeah...

William returns carrying a cordless telephone. Judith hurriedly slips the revolver under the sofa. William hands the telephone to Nina.

William (*to Nina*) – It's for you. Gertrude...

Nina – Thanks. *(She takes the phone into the next room.)* Hello? Yes, Gertrude...

William – Strange voice she's got, hasn't she?

Judith – Who?

William – This Gertrude!

Judith – What kind of voice?

William – I don't know. Not exactly feminine.

Judith – She's not applying to be a flight attendant, you know.

William – I guessed that much. But what sort of career can you have with a name like Gertrude? It's a serious disadvantage at a job interview. What does she do, anyway?

Judith – She's a colleague of Nina's, like I said. They're training together.

William – Training as lawyers? At which firm?

Judith – I forget... Zelder and Carvani, I think.

William – Oh yes. That sounds vaguely familiar.

A police siren is briefly heard from the street. Nina returns.

Nina – Gertrude's waiting downstairs. I'd better go.

Judith – You're still coming for Christmas dinner?

Nina – Of course. I told you, I'm bringing the turkey.

William – You can bring Gertrude too, if you like.

Nina – Oh? Why would I bring Gertrude? It's not as if we're married.

William – You can tell me anything. I'm your father. I'd love you just the same...

Nina – Anything?

William – Almost anything.

Nina – Even if the turkey arrives in a police car?

William plainly misses the allusion.

Judith – Off you go, then. Shoo!

William – Yes, hurry up. We can't wait to get rid of you. We've wanted a guest room for years... *(Nina kisses him goodbye.)* Now all we need are some guests. Still, with no child to look after, we'll finally have time to make a few friends.

Nina is about to leave with her rolling suitcase.

Judith – Call me when you arrive, okay?

Nina – Don't worry.

Nina leaves. Her parents sit in silence on the sofa.

William – That's it, then. We're officially a pair of old fools.

Judith – You were an old fool long before this.

Silence.

William – Do you want to play Monopoly?

Judith – Not much fun with only two players. We can have our usual game at Christmas. With Gertrude...

William – What shall we do with her room?

Judith – You're obsessed. There's no rush.

William – We could leave it exactly as it is and turn it into a shrine. Burn a little incense now and then.

Judith – Fancy going away for a few days? I've got plenty of leave to use up. And at the funeral home, after the holidays, business is pretty dead...

William – Mmm...

Judith – I don't know why, but people seem to prefer dying between Christmas and New Year.

William – What we need is a permanent holiday.

Judith – Don't scare me.

William – If I lose my job, you could stop working too.

Judith – I'm not sure we can afford it. We've still got your mother's nursing home to pay for. Unless we win the lottery... Besides, what would I do?

William – Whatever you want, for once. Haven't you ever wanted to do something else?

Judith – There is something I've been thinking about for a while...

William – No.

Judith – Opening a bed-and-breakfast...

William – Why not? We've just got a room free.

Judith – Not here! In the country!

William *(horrified)* – The country?!

The doorbell rings.

Judith – See? I told you she'd be back. She must have forgotten something.

Judith goes to open the door. William picks up the newspaper and unfolds it.

William *(reading)* – Escape from La Santé prison in Paris... The prisoner threatened his guards with a fake revolver... Funny. Why does this face look familiar?

Judith returns.

Judith – It's not Nina...

William – Who is it?

Judith – An older man dressed rather strangely...

William – White beard? Red suit? I wondered who'd left a sleigh in the disabled parking space downstairs.

Judith – That idiot says he's your father.

William – My father?

Judith – I thought he was dead!

William – Me too...

Judith – That's what you told me! He's not dead?

William – He was dead to me. I haven't seen him in twenty years.

Judith – And what made you think he was dead?

William – I found some bones while digging in my mother's garden once.

Judith – So that's where your love of gardening comes from...

William – I assumed she'd buried him there.

Judith – Of course. The obvious explanation. And you didn't ask her?

William – Ask who?

Judith – Your mother!

William – At first I didn't dare. You can't just ask your mother something like that. She only told me he'd gone on a long journey.

Judith – And then? Didn't you wonder why he hadn't come back after twenty years?

William – I did, but now she's in that nursing home, she can't remember a thing. The police could interrogate her for hours and she still wouldn't be able to tell them her own name.

Judith – We can't just leave him on the doorstep.

William – Why not?

Judith – He's still your father...

Judith leaves, leaving William bewildered.

William – Then whose bones were those in the garden?

Blackout.

Act 2

Judith returns with a dignified-looking older man, wearing old-fashioned, rather flamboyant clothes and carrying a wrapped present.

Judith – How kind of you to drop in. And I don't even know your first name...

Fausto – Fausto. My name is Fausto, my dear lady. But you may call me... Fausto.

William – I don't remember his name being Fausto...

An awkward silence.

Judith – Well, William, aren't you going to say hello to your father?

William – Yes, of course... Dad? What blew you in?

Fausto – An ill wind, I'm afraid.

William – Really? Somehow a fair wind would have surprised me more.

Fausto – I was meant to fly out of Charles de Gaulle Airport. But with this volcanic ash cloud...

William *(to Judith)* – See? I told you there was something diabolical about that volcano. The bowels of the earth start spewing fire and my father crawls out of his grave.

Judith – So you're only passing through...

Fausto – I thought I'd take the opportunity to see my son. And finally meet my daughter-in-law... and my grandson.

Judith – It's a girl...

Fausto – Ah...

Judith – And you've come at a bad time...

William – She's just left home for good. Such bad luck. If you'd come ten years earlier, you might have caught her.

Judith senses the tension and tries to make conversation.

Judith – But please, have a seat!

Fausto hands her the gift package.

Fausto – I brought a little something for the child.

Judith *(taking the present)* – Oh, thank you! I'll give it to her when I see her. Haven't you any luggage?

Fausto – I left it... in the airport's left-luggage office.

Judith – Would you like something to drink?

Fausto – I wouldn't want to bother you...

Judith – Don't be silly. What can I offer you? We hardly ever have a drink before dinner.

William – We hardly ever have visitors. We haven't many friends, and no close family.

Judith – How about some prune wine? We brought it back from a holiday near Agen, in southwest France. We haven't had a chance to open it yet.

Fausto – Prune wine, perfect.

William – Excellent for keeping things moving.

Judith puts the present in a corner and goes out. An awkward silence.

Fausto – So, son, how are things?

William – Very well, thank you.

Fausto – Aren't you pleased to see your old dad?

William – Yes, yes, but... You just erupt into our lives like that...

Fausto – Burst into your lives. People burst in. Volcanoes erupt.

William – How kind of you to come back and give me a grammar lesson. Last time I saw you, I'd just taken my school-leaving exams.

Fausto – Did you pass?

William – It's touching that you take an interest in my education. Where exactly have you been for the last twenty years?

Fausto – Not far away, actually. A few kilometres, as the crow flies.

William – Of course. That explains why you never came to see me. Though you aren't a bird, I suppose.

Fausto – Birds can find themselves in cages too...

Judith returns with a tray bearing a bottle of prune wine and three glasses.

Judith – Here we are. This should be refreshing...

Judith pours the drinks.

Fausto – Thank you.

Judith – Imagine having a drink with the windows open in the middle of December!

Fausto – Christmas on the terrace...

Judith – That's just what my husband said. So you're William's father...

Fausto – Technically, yes...

Judith – I take it you don't live in France.

Fausto – I don't really have a permanent address.

William – You had one at La Santé, though...

Judith sips from her glass.

Judith – A bit warm, isn't it? I'll fetch some ice.

*Judith leaves a*gain.

William – So they've let you out? Not for good behaviour, I imagine.

Fausto – Not exactly...

William – You escaped?

Fausto – It's a little more complicated than that.

William – It's complicated enough for me already.

Fausto – Let's say circumstances worked in my favour.

William – Well, fancy that.

Fausto – I was about to leave the country, but then that volcano...

William – And suddenly you remembered you had a son.

Fausto – Given my situation, a hotel isn't a good idea tonight. Naturally, I thought of you.

William – Naturally?

Fausto – You wouldn't hand your own father over to the police, would you?

William – Depends. Is there a reward?

Judith returns with an ice bucket.

Judith – And here are the ice cubes!

She uses tongs to put ice cubes in the glasses.

Fausto – Thank you for your hospitality...

Judith – By the way, have you found somewhere to sleep tonight? If your flight's delayed until tomorrow...

William shoots her a furious look.

Fausto – I'll manage.

William – Besides, we haven't really got room for him...

Judith – There's Nina's room. You were desperate for a guest room.

William – Yes, but he's not a friend.

Judith – Anyone for more prune wine?

A phone rings. Fausto takes a huge, old-fashioned mobile telephone from his pocket. He pulls out its telescopic aerial and answers.

Fausto – Hello? *(To the others.)* Excuse me... Hello?

Fausto retreats into the house.

William – What possessed you to offer him Nina's room?

Judith – He's your father, isn't he?

William – I don't know this man!

Judith – You aren't sure it's him?

William – I haven't seen him in twenty years! I don't remember him looking like that.

Judith – People change in twenty years. You're not starting to lose your memory like your mother, are you?

William – Do you think he looks like me?

Judith – If you're doubtful, we could ask for some identification.

William – I'd rather frisk him.

Judith – For what?

William – To see whether he's carrying a gun!

Judith – Ah, I see...

William – What's in that thing, anyway? Can't you hear ticking?

Judith – Do you really think your father would come back after twenty years just to blow himself up in our living room?

William – Then what is it?

Judith – It's the cuckoo clock!

William – The cuckoo? My father, you mean? He's always had a habit of laying his eggs in somebody else's nest.

Fausto returns, wearing a rather forced smile.

Fausto – I hate to impose, but I may have to accept your kind invitation after all. A friend offered to put me up, but he's just cancelled.

Judith – No problem. Make yourself at home. Until the wind changes...

Fausto – The winds...

Judith – The radioactive... I mean volcanic... cloud.

Fausto – Ah, yes, of course.

Judith – At least nobody tried to tell us that cloud stopped at the border.

Fausto – Clouds are like birds. Borders mean nothing to them.

William – Not even the borders of the Schengen Area...

The doorbell rings. Fausto freezes.

Fausto – Are you expecting anyone?

Judith – No. I'll go and see.

Judith goes out.

Fausto – Is there a way out through the terrace?

William – Yes. It leads to the garden.

Fausto – Ah...?

William – You could always jump. We're on the third floor, though.

Fausto – Ah...

Judith returns with Nina.

William – Oh, it's you. Fausto was afraid it might be the police.

Judith – Nina forgot... her mobile. They're so tiny now you never know where you've put them. At least you can't lose yours, Fausto! This is Nina, my daughter. Nina, this is...

William *(interrupting)* – Fausto. A homeless man we found in the street. He had an "I'm hungry" sign, so we invited him in for a drink.

Judith is taken aback by the lie. Nina is equally bewildered.

Nina – Pleased to meet you...

Judith – Fausto's staying here tonight.

Nina – That guest room didn't stay empty for long.

Judith – Have a glass of prune wine with us?

Nina – Why not?

William – Won't that make you late? Gertrude will be worried.

Nina – Five minutes won't make any difference.

William – I'll pour the drinks. *(To Judith.)* Why don't you show our friend to his room? *(To Fausto.)* It's our family suite. Very quiet.

Fausto – All right...

Judith – Would you follow me?

Judith leaves with Fausto.

Fausto – After you, madam...

William pours Nina a glass. She looks curiously at her father, who seems uncomfortable.

William – Aren't you going to drink that?

Nina – Who is this man?

William – I told you. A homeless man. He had nowhere to sleep, and we happened to have a spare room...

Nina – You're not usually big on charity.

William – It's Christmas, after all!

Nina – You always say you couldn't care less about Christmas.

William – Precisely. I've decided to restore some meaning to a festival that's become nothing more than an obscene celebration of consumerism. Did you know that people once laid an extra place at Christmas dinner for any stranger who might knock at the door?

Nina – Father Christmas, for instance?

William – It was called the poor man's place. It was meant for the spirits of dead relatives, who were invited to join the feast.

Nina *(unconvinced)* – Right...

William – And to prove he's a good man, he's brought you a present.

Nina glances at the package.

Nina – For me? Does he know me?

William – He must have heard about you.

Nina unwraps the present and takes out a revolver.

Nina – A revolver. Lovely. Please thank him for me.

William – When you were little, you always wanted to play cops and robbers. Remember? None of the other girls wanted to play with you.

Nina – Mm-hmm...

Nina looks at the newspaper, to give herself something to do.

William – You even locked the cleaner in a cupboard in the basement once because you said she'd stolen your sweets. We didn't find her until the next morning.

An article catches Nina's eye.

Nina – A homeless man... His photograph's in the paper! Haven't you seen it?

William – No...

Nina – He escaped from La Santé prison this morning! I knew his face was familiar. I must have seen his wanted notice at work.

William – Has he got a lawyer?

Nina – I'm telling you, he's dangerous!

Fausto returns with Judith. Instinctively, Nina points the revolver at him. He recoils.

Fausto – Sorry. If I'd known, I'd have bought you a doll.

William – That would have been much more suitable for a girl. Especially at her age.

Fausto – Don't worry. It's a fake.

Nina – A very convincing one...

William takes the toy revolver from Nina and inspects it.

William – I bet a prison guard would be fooled if you pointed this at him. *(He tries to spin the revolver around his finger like a cowboy. It slips from his hand and lands behind the sofa.)* Sorry. I'm out of practice.

William bends down and, without realising it, picks up the real revolver Judith hid there earlier.

Judith – Oh my God...

William *(to Nina)* – You seem to know an awful lot about guns.

Nina – Well, in my line of work...

William – My daughter's a lawyer.

Fausto – Excellent. A lawyer in the family can come in very handy.

Judith *(to Nina)* – I wonder if now might be the time for you to come out...

William – I knew it!

Nina – It's not what you think, honestly. But please, put that gun down. Slowly.

As a joke, William aims what he thinks is the toy revolver at his father.

William – I've always wanted to do this. I must tell my therapist.

Nina – No!

William accidentally pulls the trigger. The gunshot startles him as much as anyone.

William – It went off by itself! What a sensitive trigger. And the realism! I even felt the recoil. How do they do it?

Fausto stands motionless for a moment, then collapses.

Judith – Oh my God. You've killed your father.

William – As I was saying... I've always wanted to do that.

Nina – His father?

Judith – Your grandfather...

Nina – I thought Grandpa was dead!

Judith – Well, now he is.

Nina – I'd better tell Gertrude not to wait for me.

Blackout.

Act 3

Judith and Nina stand aghast over Fausto's body. William seems merely puzzled.

William – But it's a fake! Can't you see he's pretending? It's a joke. Isn't it, Dad?

Nina – That was my service weapon.

William – Your service weapon?

Nina – I'm a police officer, Dad. Not a lawyer.

William – A police officer?

Judith picks up the toy revolver.

Judith – This is the fake one.

William – Oops... My therapist would probably call that an unconscious act.

Nina – Well, it seems to have worked remarkably well for an unconscious act.

Judith – Oh my God! What are we going to do?

William – We could bury him in the garden.

Judith – Is that a family tradition?

Nina – We can't do that! It's against the law!

Judith – Darling, this really isn't the moment to be so rigid.

Nina – Rigid?

William – It was an accident. Involuntary manslaughter.

Judith – And as you said, it's your service weapon! I warned you not to leave it lying around.

William – He's an escaped prisoner. Nobody will be looking for him here.

Judith – I think he's moving...

William – Wouldn't it be kinder to finish him off before burying him?

Nina examines Fausto, opening his shirt.

Nina – The bullet glanced off his medal. The impact knocked him unconscious, that's all.

William – A medal?

Nina – Steel, by the look of it.

William – He probably made it in his cell to pass the time.

Nina – With the Pope's picture on it...

Judith – Oh my God! It's a miracle!

William – One or two more miracles like that and the Pope could qualify for sainthood. I didn't know my father was so devout.

Judith – Well, Italians... Even the Mafia take religion seriously.

William – I didn't know he was Italian either.

Fausto regains consciousness.

Fausto – What happened?

Judith – Just a little fainting spell, Grandpa. All the excitement of a family reunion must have been too much for you.

Nina – That doesn't change the fact that he escaped from prison.

Judith – We can't turn him over to the police!

Nina – I am the police!

Fausto – I thought she was a lawyer.

William – So did I. Oddly enough, yesterday I'd have been disappointed. Today I'm rather relieved.

Nina – Oh yeah?

William – It should make this family reunion much easier to manage.

Judith – What are we going to do with him?

Nina – Armed robbery, handling stolen goods and now a prison break... They never found the proceeds of his last robbery.

William – Really?

Judith – He's your grandfather, all the same.

William – You can't choose your family. *(To Fausto.)* Perhaps you'd tell me why you've really come.

A pause.

Fausto – I went to see your mother before I came here.

William – And then?

Fausto – She didn't recognise me. I don't think she's quite herself any more.

William – I forgot you too, and there's nothing wrong with my memory. It's perfectly normal to forget someone you haven't seen for twenty years.

Fausto – The trouble is... There's one particular thing I needed her to remember.

William – Go on.

Fausto – She hid the proceeds of my last robbery.

William – And she can't remember where she put them. Is that it?

Fausto – Have you any idea?

William – Me?

Fausto – She might have mentioned it to you.

William – Even when she had all her faculties, my mother never gave much away. She didn't even tell me my father was in prison rather than buried in the garden.

Nina – In the garden?

The cuckoo calls three times.

Judith – Now she's like this old cuckoo clock: stuck on the same tune.

Nina – Have you all gone mad? We're talking about the proceeds of an armed robbery!

Judith – How much?

Fausto – Twelve million.

Judith – Twelve million?!

William – That's quite something.

Judith – Enough to make plans.

Fausto – We could share it.

Judith – A family gift, in a way...

William – A final settlement.

Judith – Where did it come from?

Fausto – Société Générale.

Nina – He robbed the bank, Mum. He didn't make a withdrawal.

Judith *(to William)* – You could think of it as a redundancy package.

Nina – If we find the money.

William – It won't be easy. When Mum went into the care home, we had to sell her house to help pay the fees. We can hardly ask the new owners to let us dig up their garden.

Judith – By the way, if the bones in the garden weren't your father's, whose were they?

Nina – What bones?

Fausto – The gardener found the loot while planting bamboo. Shortly afterwards, he fell out of a cherry tree.

William – A domestic accident, then.

Nina – What terrible luck.

Fausto – He was working off the books and had no family, so your mother decided to arrange the funeral herself. She buried him under the cherry tree. A very private ceremony.

William – How sad, having no loving family to rely on, even for your funeral.

Judith – Very true. I work in the funeral business, and believe me, sometimes you'd be better off buried in your own garden.

William – Particularly if you're a gardener.

Fausto – That was when your mother moved the money. I don't know where.

Judith – Where on earth could that mad old woman have put it?

Fausto *(to Nina)* – Can you think of anywhere your grandmother might have hidden the money?

Nina – No. And even if I could, I certainly wouldn't tell you!

Judith – Think. What could she have done with that kind of fortune?

William – Maybe she opened a secret account in Switzerland.

Nina – Can you really picture Grandma opening a Swiss bank account?

William – We'd still need to know which bank and the account number.

Judith – Or she might have hidden it here.

William – She did live with us for a few months before Judith insisted we put her in a home.

Judith – Me?

William – Yeah...

Judith – That's rich! You were the one who said you couldn't bear her any longer!

Fausto – Then let's search the house.

William – It's not a big house. I think we'd have noticed millions hidden away somewhere.

Judith – Unless somebody found it and decided to keep it... all to himself. Or herself.

Nina – Are you accusing me?

Judith – Of course not. I was thinking of the cleaner, for instance. Remember, when you were little, she was forever stealing your sweets.

Fausto – Perhaps she took it to the nursing home with her.

William – When she left her own house, all she insisted on bringing was that ancient cuckoo clock that's been driving us mad all day.

Judith – And all night.

William – Of course the nursing home wouldn't take it, so Grandma palmed it off on us.

Nina – Perhaps she wanted you to think fondly of her every hour.

William – If I'd had my way, we'd have given the wretched thing to charity years ago.

Nina – It's the only thing you've got left of your family! Well, apart from your mother and father.

The cuckoo calls three times again.

Fausto *(checking his watch)* – What's the time?

William – It was three o'clock when the nurses came for Mum. Ever since she went away, the clock has always struck three. To make us feel guilty, no doubt.

Judith – Good heavens! The cuckoo clock!

Nina – What about it?

Judith – What if she hid the money inside it?

They all turn towards the clock.

William – Can't hurt to look.

As Judith searches inside the clock, Fausto glances at Nina.

Fausto – So you like being in the police?

William and Judith continue searching.

William – Nothing here. What about you?

Judith – No... Hang on!

She pulls out a bin bag and opens it as the other three watch intently.

Judith – A bag full of banknotes...

William – That must be what jammed the clock at three o'clock.

Nina – How much did you say?

Fausto – About twelve million francs.

William – Francs? *(He examines the notes.)* Bloody hell! They're French francs!

Fausto – Of course they are. It was twenty years ago.

They are all stunned.

William – What the hell are we supposed to do with francs?

Judith takes out her smartphone and taps at the screen.

Judith – French francs haven't been exchangeable for euros since 17 February 2012.

William *(to Fausto)* – So that's no good, then. I knew it was too good to be true.

Judith looks deeper into the bag.

Judith – Hold on. There are four gold bars at the bottom!

Fausto examines the bag.

Fausto – Four? There were eight! Where are the others?

Fausto looks at them suspiciously.

Nina – Oh, go on. Accuse us of stealing, Grandpa.

Fausto – What did she do with the rest?

William – Perhaps she spent it.

Judith – While we've been bleeding ourselves dry to pay for her care home!

William – What's four gold bars worth in euros?

Nina – Depends on the price of gold, but quite a bit, I'd imagine.

William – Without the banknotes we can't exchange, it's not all that much, really.

Judith – What do we do?

William – Split it?

Nina – But it's stolen money!

Judith – It's the bank's money. They're the real thieves!

Fausto – Of course, split four ways... One bar each. It wouldn't get us very far. Especially not me.

Judith – We could invest the lot in a bed-and-breakfast in the countryside and run it together! The whole family reunited at last!

The other three are less than enthusiastic.

Fausto – Or we could put it all on a game of poker. Winner takes all.

William – Poker? He's spent twenty years playing cards with his fellow prisoners! We might as well challenge a dictionary editor to Scrabble.

Nina – Then let's choose a game of chance.

Fausto – Russian roulette?

William – Grandpa's joking.

Judith – Let's settle it with a game of Monopoly!

The other three stare at her in disbelief.

Blackout.

Act 4

A furious game of Monopoly is under way, with all the excitement of a casino.

Nina – It's the first time I've ever played Monopoly with real banknotes.

Nina rolls the dice.

Judith – Yes. French francs that can't even be exchanged for euros any more.

Nina – Five. Chance. *(She draws a card.)* You've won second prize in a beauty contest. Collect 500 francs.

William rolls the dice.

William – Seven. One, two, three, four, five, six, seven... Rue de Paradis! I'll buy it!

Fausto rolls the dice.

Fausto – Three. One, two, three... Community Chest. Get out of jail free. This card may be kept until needed or sold. I'll keep it.

Judith rolls the dice.

Judith – Eight. Montmartre. That's mine. I'll build a holiday cottage and three guest rooms.

Nina rolls the dice.

Nina – Two. One, two... Go to jail. That's where we're all going to end up, I can tell you.

William rolls the dice. A police siren sounds in the distance.

William – Four. One, two, three, four... Chance. Société Générale gives you 3,000 francs to help you get established.

Judith – Francs...

William – The bank I work for gave Nina this Monopoly set when we opened her first account.

Fausto rolls the dice.

Fausto – Eleven. Pigalle! I'm buying it. Two seedy hotels and three brothels!

Fausto is about to take money straight out of the bank. Nina instantly points her revolver at him.

Nina – Hands off the cash, Grandpa! I'm guarding the bank! *(Fausto points his own revolver at her.)* Mine's the real one, so I'd put that down if I were you.

Fausto gives in and lowers his weapon.

Fausto – It pains me that my own granddaughter should suspect me of dishonesty.

The doorbell rings. Everyone freezes.

Judith – Who could that be at this hour?

Nina – Didn't you hear the police siren?

William – I think the game's over.

Nina – Not so fast. You can't just stop a game of Monopoly in the middle. I'll see who it is. *(She gets up.)* Dad, keep an eye on the bank!

William – Don't worry. I know the business.

They wait, eyeing one another suspiciously.

Judith – Another glass of prune wine?

Nina returns.

William – So?

Nina – My colleagues. They wanted to know whether the escaped prisoner might have sought refuge with his son.

Fausto – Well?

Nina – I showed them my police ID.

Fausto *(relieved)* – That's my girl. You really are one of the family now.

Nina – The game goes on.

Judith rolls the dice.

Judith – Twelve. Champs-Élysées...

William – Mine! With a hotel, that's 150,000 francs.

Judith – There goes all my money... *(To William.)* Still, what's yours is mine, isn't it? We're married, after all.

Nina rolls the dice.

Nina – Seven. Pay a fine of 100 francs or draw a Chance card. I'll take a card. *(She draws one and turns pale.)* Advance to Rue de la Paix...

William – Mine again! With a hotel, that's 200,000!

Nina – I'm bankrupt too.

William *(to Fausto)* – Just you and me now. *(He rolls the dice.)* Jail. Just visiting.

Fausto rolls the dice.

Fausto – Go straight to Gare de Lyon. That's where I'm heading as soon as I leave. The trains will be watched less closely than the airports.

William rolls the dice.

William – Free Parking...

Fausto rolls the dice.

Fausto – Nine... Rue de la Paix.

William – Mine! Two hundred thousand francs!

Fausto – I'm bankrupt.

Judith – In the end, the bank always wins.

Fausto makes a sudden grab for Nina's revolver and threatens the others with it.

Fausto – Sorry, but I have no choice. *(The other three put up their hands.)* This is a hold-up. No sudden movements and nobody gets hurt. Hand over the cash!

Blackout.

Act 5

William and Judith sit in their armchairs on either side of the cuckoo clock, passing a joint back and forth. Two glasses and a bottle stand on the coffee table. The cuckoo calls three times.

William – The cuckoo always calls three times...

Judith – Mmm...

William – I thought it was working again.

Judith – It is.

William – What time is it?

Judith – Three o'clock.

William – Ah, I see...

Silence.

William – I wonder how far he'll get with his gold bars.

Judith – As far as the Italian border, perhaps.

William – I hope he'll at least send us a postcard.

Judith – Mmmm.

William – How are your parents, by the way? We haven't seen them for ages. They're not dead, are they?

Judith – No, no.

William – How old are they now?

Judith – I don't know. They're so old I've started wondering whether I'll die of old age before they do.

William – We never have any luck, do we?

Judith – Why do you say that?

William – You'd think fate might give us a little helping hand occasionally.

Judith – Don't be so gloomy. Look on the bright side. The bottle's half full. *(She picks it up and refills their glasses.)* We've never won the lottery, but we've never had a serious illness either.

William – And never a tax audit.

Judith – We've never even been picked for jury service.

William – You're right. We weren't born under a lucky star. But not an unlucky one either.

Judith – Perhaps we were born under a starless sky.

William – Nobody even noticed we were born.

Judith – And nobody will notice when we're gone.

William – We're stowaways aboard this ghost ship called Earth.

They go on drinking and smoking in silence.

Judith – At this rate we'll be having dinner on the terrace.

William – Nina's coming for Christmas dinner, isn't she?

Judith – Of course.

William – And she's still bringing the turkey?

Judith – Yes. But she's not quite so keen on enforcing the law any more.

William – Just as well.

Judith – Pity your father couldn't stay. We could have had a proper family Christmas.

William – He arrived like Father Christmas, but he left with all the presents.

Judith – Never mind. We'll have a quiet Christmas Eve, just the three of us.

William – I'll never be able to play Monopoly again.

Judith – You're right. After a game like that, all the others would be a disappointment... *(A silence.)* What if we opened that bed-and-breakfast after all?

William – I've just found out my job at the bank is gone. We can't count on my inheritance any more. And we've still got my mother to support. I don't want to see the glass as half empty, but...

Judith – Maybe the bottle's half full after all.

William – What?

Judith – I know what your mother did with the rest of the loot.

William – What?

Judith – The cuckoo clock.

William – The cuckoo clock?

Judith – Its counterweights are solid gold. With the financial crisis, the price of gold has quadrupled in recent years.

William – You're joking!

Judith – When she still had her wits about her, your mother must have melted down half the gold bars and turned them into counterweights. In case the police ever found the rest.

William – Gold is a safe investment. So is family, of course.

Judith – So?

William – What?

Judith – The bed-and-breakfast?

William – Why not? I'll be so bored in the countryside I'll have no choice but to write that novel.

Silence.

Judith – Are you absolutely sure that man was your father?

William – He certainly knew Mum well. Though I've always had a strange feeling I was the gardener's son...

Judith – Your mother was sleeping with the gardener?

William – It might explain that mysterious accident he had.

Judith – Not to mention your passion for gardening.

William – And if the gardener was my father, at least I know where to find him. In the garden.

Judith – Yes... But not in ours.

Silence.

Judith – Any of those cherry tomato plants left?

William – No. We smoked the lot.

Judith – You'll have to plant some more when we move to the countryside.

The cuckoo clock begins to call incessantly, producing sounds never heard from it before.

Blackout.

The end.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th, Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the contact form on his websites.

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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