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The Perfect Son-in-Law

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Translation by the author

When you abandon your fiancée just days before the wedding, leaving only a sticky note on the fridge by way of explanation, coming back a year later might not be such a good idea...

Characters
Valentine
Stéphane
Maurice
Françoise

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A cluttered living room. A baby is crying in a crib. Above it, a musical mobile plays one of those familiar tunes supposedly designed to put babies to sleep, while casting kaleidoscopic patterns on the back wall. A young woman, Valentine, enters and picks the baby up to comfort him.

Valentine – Come on, bedtime now... Why are you crying like that? You've got nothing to cry about! I have plenty of reasons to cry, but you? What on earth have you got to howl about? You've got a full stomach and a clean bottom. You spend all day staring at psychedelic pictures on the ceiling and listening to dreamy music. What more do you want? Your teddy? I've told you: Mummy left your bear on the roof of Grandma's car yesterday. It flew off on the highway and a huge truck ran over it. We managed to find one leg, but the rest must have been crushed under the wheels. Do you want the leg anyway?

Still holding the baby, Valentine fetches the teddy bear's leg and gives it to him.

Valentine – Here you are. But I warn you, it's not a pretty sight... It's covered in grease and smells of diesel...

The baby stops crying.

Valentine – Hallelujah! Perhaps I can finally get some peace and quiet...

She gently puts the baby back in the crib.

Valentine – Those fuel fumes seem to calm him down...

The shrill ringing of the telephone immediately sets the baby crying again.

Valentine – Oh, you've got to be joking! This is a nightmare!

She answers, in a foul mood.

Valentine *(exasperated)* – Yes, Mum... Yes, I know you're coming over later. You've already called three times to tell me... Of course I'm here. Where else would I be? Sunbathing on a beach in the Seychelles? A surprise... You know I'm not keen on surprises, but fine... Yes, yes, I can't wait to find out what it is, obviously... All right, see you later, Mum... Love you too... Oh, Mum! Whatever you do, don't ring the doorbell when you get here! I might have managed to get him to sleep by then... Just knock gently. I'll hear you! It's a one-bedroom apartment. I couldn't get very far from the front door if I tried. Right, see you later...

Valentine hangs up. The baby is still crying. She picks him up again.

Valentine – What do you want? More diesel on your teddy? Sorry, I haven't got any! Paint thinner might work, but you'll have to promise not to smoke in bed, like your father used to... And don't ask me where your father has gone, all right? Mummy's lost her teddy too. And she didn't even get to keep a leg... Shall I sing you something? I'm not sure I know many songs... I can never remember the words... But I could play you something Daddy was very fond of. It's called Smoke on the Water.

Valentine imitates the famous opening riff of Deep Purple's Smoke on the Water with her mouth. Apparently stunned by this unexpected performance, the baby immediately falls silent. Valentine lays him back in the crib.

Valentine – Unbelievable! He seems to prefer Deep Purple to lullabies...

The loud doorbell rings, setting the baby off again. Valentine freezes for a moment, then heads for the door, furious.

Valentine – I'm going to strangle them...

Valentine opens the door and is astonished to see a young man on the doorstep, wearing a suit, white shirt and tie.

Stéphane – You do recognise me, don't you...?

Valentine – Stéphane?

The baby has stopped crying.

Stéphane – I really need to talk to you.

Valentine – Absolutely not. Get lost. I never want to see you again!

She tries to close the door, but he stops her.

Stéphane – I understand your reaction, Valentine... But you have to hear me out. Please, let me in for five minutes...

Valentine – You must be out of your mind, turning up here without warning. After a whole year!

Stéphane – If I'd warned you, you wouldn't have opened the door...

Valentine – I said get lost! As far as I'm concerned, you're dead. Do you understand?

Stéphane – All right, I won't force my way in. But if you won't let me in, I'll sit on your doormat and stay there until you agree to listen to what I have to say...

Valentine hesitates, clearly overwhelmed.

Valentine – Fine, but give me thirty seconds first. The place is a mess... And then you leave, understood?

Stéphane – Understood.

Valentine closes the door.

Valentine – Oh no. This cannot be happening...

Valentine hastily removes everything that might betray the presence of a baby: clothes, nappies, toys... Then she bends over the crib.

Valentine – If you keep quiet, Mummy will buy you another bear, one with a head and arms. Deal?

She carries the crib into the next room, comes back, straightens her clothes and opens the front door again.

Stéphane – Thanks, Valentine...

Valentine – We said five minutes. *(She checks her watch.)* In five minutes you're out of here. I'm warning you.

Stéphane – Okay.

Stéphane comes in, looks around the room, then at Valentine.

Stéphane – You haven't changed...

Valentine – I can't say the same about you... Last time I saw you, you had long hair, a beard, a leather jacket and cowboy boots...

Stéphane – They say clothes don't make the man. But sometimes they do. I've changed, I promise...

Valentine – What do you want, Stéphane?

Stéphane – I understand why you're angry with me...

Valentine – Me? Why on earth would I be angry? This time last year, we were one week away from our wedding. Remember? The invitations had gone out. We'd even done the seating plan.

Stéphane – I know...

Valentine – You know? Yet that didn't stop you vanishing overnight without a word of explanation...

Stéphane – That's not quite fair... I did leave you a note. You found it, didn't you?

Valentine – Oh yes, sorry. The sticky note on the fridge... I kept it as a souvenir, in fact. *(She opens a drawer, takes out a note and reads it.)* "You're too good for me. I don't deserve you. Forget me." Three sentences, three spelling mistakes. *(She gives him a murderous look.)* And that's meant to be enough for me to welcome you back with open arms twelve months later?

He looks suitably ashamed.

Stéphane – Let me explain...

Valentine – Couldn't find a girl who was worse than me, then? After a whole year of looking. That's not very flattering, but never mind.

Stéphane – I didn't tell you everything, Valentine.

Valentine – Wait, let me guess... You were abducted by aliens. They took you to their planet to conduct scientific experiments on you, and they've only just released you. Is that it?

Stéphane – You're not far off, actually.

Valentine – You're joking?

Stéphane – I got arrested for holding up a shop... I was sentenced to a year in prison...

After a stunned silence, Valentine applauds sarcastically.

Valentine – Well done! What an achievement. I'm impressed...

Stéphane – I knew you wouldn't believe me...

Valentine – Oh, you were serious!

Stéphane rolls up his shirt sleeve to reveal something resembling an electronic monitoring device.

Stéphane – I'm out on parole. I have to wear an electronic tag for a few more days...

Valentine's sarcasm gives way to genuine surprise.

Valentine *(suspicious)* – Aren't those usually worn around the ankle? I've seen them on television.

Stéphane – Maybe in American series... Here in France, we wear them on our wrists. That's why they're called bracelets...

Valentine – What possessed you to rob a shop?

Stéphane – I needed money... To pay for our wedding, among other things...

Valentine – So that's what our love was worth to you? The contents of a little supermarket's till. How romantic.

Stéphane – It was more of a corner grocery shop, actually...

Valentine – If you were going to prison anyway, you could at least have robbed a bank! You've never had any ambition, Stéphane. You're a loser. You were right about one thing: I'm too good for you...

Stéphane – It was the grocery shop just downstairs from my flat... The owner recognised me and called the police. I only had time to come over and leave that note before the officers arrived to arrest me...

Valentine – Why didn't you tell me?

Stéphane – I wanted to spare you an awkward explanation with your parents!

Valentine – How thoughtful of you.

Stéphane – Especially your father. Being a police officer and all... Imagine how humiliating it would have been for him to tell his colleagues that his daughter's wedding was off because his future son-in-law was in prison. He never liked me much as it was... Your father never trusted me...

Valentine – And who can imagine why...

Stéphane – But I had a lot of time to think during that year behind bars, Valentine. Believe me. And I've learnt one thing: the future is a dish best served cold.

She is dumbstruck by the profundity of this observation.

Valentine – It took you a whole year to come up with that?

Stéphane – No more stupid mistakes, I swear. On the lives of our future children...

Valentine – Have you given up music too?

Stéphane shows off his new businesslike appearance.

Stéphane – You're looking at a new Stéphane, Valentine.

Valentine – I can see that... When I opened the door, I thought you were a Jehovah's Witness.

Stéphane – Don't tell me you preferred the old Stéphane.

Valentine – Just give me time to get used to this version...

Stéphane – I've even got a proper job!

Valentine – Doing what, exactly? Undertaking?

Stéphane – I work... in the food industry.

Stéphane takes Valentine's hands.

Stéphane – Trust me, Valentine. I've grown up. I want to settle down now. Share everything with someone...

Valentine – You haven't got anything! What are you going to share? You had to rob a grocer just to buy our wedding rings!

Stéphane – I mean share my life with someone. With you, if you'll have me...

Valentine – Right... Till death do us part. You still know exactly what to say to a woman.

Stéphane – Can I kiss you?

She suddenly pulls away.

Valentine – Right, your five minutes are up, Stéphane. I kept my promise. I listened. Now you keep yours. Get out.

Stéphane – I tried to write to you from prison, I swear. But you'd moved without leaving an address. My letters came back. And under the circumstances I didn't dare ask your parents...

Valentine – At least that was a sensible decision.

Stéphane – It took courage to come and knock on your door after what happened, you know.

Valentine – What a hero you are...

Stéphane – Give me another chance, Valentine.

Valentine – I haven't got time, Stéphane.

Stéphane – I understand you can't forgive me straight away. You need time. I'll wait. As long as it takes. I've got all the time in the world now...

Valentine – Well, I haven't! Don't you understand what I'm saying? I haven't got time right now! I'm expecting someone!

Stéphane – There's someone else in your life, is that it?

Valentine – That's right. He'll be here any minute. And I'd rather he didn't run into you, if you see what I mean.

Stéphane – I understand... You've moved on... You couldn't wait around for months... You've forgotten me, and that's that...

Valentine picks up the sticky note again and shows it to him.

Valentine – That's what you wanted, isn't it? Look, it says so here: “Forget me.” Well, I did. You're not part of my life any more, Stéphane...

Stéphane – In that case I'll go... You'll never hear from me again, Valentine... Unless you change your mind, of course... I'll leave you my mobile number, just in case... *(He takes out a pencil.)* Have you got a piece of paper?

She hands him the old sticky note.

Valentine – Here. Add it to your note... Then get lost, okay?

He scribbles on the note. Someone knocks at the door.

Valentine – Oh, shit!

Stéphane – Is that him? Don't worry, I won't embarrass you. I'll explain. I'm sure he'll understand.

Valentine – It's my parents!

Stéphane *(alarmed)* – Your parents? You mean... your mum and dad?

Valentine – Yes. That's usually what I mean when I say “my parents”.

Stéphane *(hopeful again)* – So they're the people you're waiting for... You're actually still single, aren't you?

Valentine is in a complete panic.

Valentine – They absolutely mustn't see you here. Do you understand?

Stéphane – I know they've got reasons to be angry with me too, but... I'll think of something to tell them. I'm sure they'll understand.

Valentine – I very much doubt it, Stéphane.

Stéphane – Well, I'd rather not mention the prison sentence. Especially with your father being a gendarme... But I'll come up with something else. Trust me, okay?

Valentine – Yes, well, no. It's really not possible, I promise you.

Stéphane – But why?

Valentine – Because... it'll be an awful shock...

Stéphane – Your father has always scared me a bit, I admit... But your mother liked me, didn't she? I'll explain everything...

Valentine – I said no, for God's sake!

The doorbell rings.

Stéphane – But why?

Valentine – Because I told them you were dead! There!

Stéphane reels. The doorbell rings again.

Stéphane – You didn't!

Valentine – At the time, it seemed the easiest way to avoid an even more humiliating explanation. And you did tell me to forget you for ever, remember? You weren't supposed to come back...

Stéphane – Your father's going to kill me...

Valentine – Well, at least then you'll really be dead.

Stéphane – What do we do?

Valentine – It's too late for you to run. There's no back exit. It's a one-bedroom apartment, and my parents are the inquisitive type.

Stéphane – The cupboards? That's where people usually hide bodies...

Valentine – This isn't a bedroom farce, Stéphane... Anyway, the cupboards are the first place my mother goes when she arrives, to inspect my wardrobe.

Stéphane – Not under the bed, at any rate. I'm allergic. The slightest bit of dust makes me sneeze.

The doorbell rings insistently once more.

Valentine – I have to open the door or my father will kick it in. Go into the bedroom for now, while I think up something convincing to explain your resurrection...

Stéphane – My resurrection... I hope you're feeling inspired. It took the entire Bible to explain the last one...

Valentine points towards the bedroom.

Valentine – Keep your mouth shut and don't come out until I fetch you. Understood?

Stéphane – Okay.

Stéphane disappears into the bedroom. The baby immediately starts crying again.

Valentine – Oh, shit... I'd forgotten about him...

The doorbell rings again. Valentine rushes to open it. Her parents enter: Maurice, who looks every inch the off-duty gendarme, and Françoise, an ageing hippie. Maurice carries a wrapped present and casts a suspicious eye around the room.

Maurice – We were beginning to wonder whether something had happened to you. I was about to break down the door...

Valentine – What could possibly happen to me?

Françoise kisses her daughter.

Françoise – Hello, darling! Are you all right? You look a bit tired...

Valentine – No, no, I'm fine... More or less...

Valentine kisses her father too. Then she notices the parcel.

Valentine – What's that? It's not Christmas yet... Or my birthday.

Maurice – The surprise your mother told you about...

Françoise – You'll never guess what's in it. Believe me, you're in for a shock.

Valentine – Really? There's a theme developing today...

Françoise – Go on, give it to her!

Maurice hands the parcel to his daughter.

Maurice – Here you are, sweetheart.

Valentine begins to unwrap it.

Valentine – It's not a parcel bomb, is it...?

She pulls out a badly battered teddy bear, missing one leg.

Valentine – What's that?

Françoise – It's Toto!

Valentine – Toto?

Françoise – Luckily I had the sense to note the truck's licence plate number. Your father asked his colleagues to put out an alert, and yesterday, bingo!

Maurice – We stopped the suspect truck on the motorway just outside Marseille. The bear was lodged in the radiator.

Françoise – I didn't want to tell you before, in case it raised false hopes...

Maurice – He's a little worse for wear, obviously... But you did keep the severed limb, didn't you?

Valentine – Of course.

Françoise – If you kept it on ice, we can stitch it back on. Only joking...

Valentine – Oh yes, he'll be delighted...

The baby starts crying again.

Françoise – Shall I fetch him? Then we can give it to him straight away.

Valentine intercepts her mother.

Valentine – No, wait. I need to explain something first.

Françoise – We can't leave him crying like that.

Maurice *(to his wife)* – If you pick him up every time he makes the slightest whimper, you'll turn him into a little wimp...

Françoise – Oh, give it a rest! Weren't you the one who made me get up twenty times a night when Valentine was a baby? You said we must never let her cry!

Maurice – She was a girl. That's different...

Françoise – Yes... And your daughter, more to the point... Right, I'll go and get him...

Valentine blocks her path again.

Valentine – I really have to tell you something first.

Françoise – What?

Valentine – I'm not alone...

Françoise – Of course you're not alone, darling! We'll always be here for you! Won't we, Maurice?

Maurice – I don't think that's quite what she meant.

Françoise – Oh my God! Something's happened to the baby! Is the doctor here? Not an ambulance, surely...

Valentine – Don't worry, everything's fine, but... there's a man in the bedroom.

Her parents stand speechless for a moment.

Françoise – A man? But that's wonderful, darling! We knew you wouldn't stay alone for the rest of your life! This isn't the old days, is it, Maurice? You're not going to dress in black and mourn your husband for ever!

Maurice – Especially as they weren't married yet...

Valentine – It's a bit more complicated, Mum...

Françoise – Only two months after giving birth... You certainly haven't wasted any time, but I'm sure he's a lovely man.

Maurice – If he's already changing nappies for someone else's baby, he must be a saint... Or a complete idiot.

Françoise – Maurice, please! Save your barrack-room jokes for the gendarmes at the station...

Maurice – It wasn't a joke...

Françoise – Tell him to come out. Introduce us. It's as simple as that.

Maurice – Who is he? Where did you meet him?

Françoise – Why don't you fetch him? He can tell us himself.

Valentine – He's Stéphane's brother.

Françoise – Stéphane's brother?

Maurice – So he's the baby's uncle... Well, that explains the nappies.

Françoise – I didn't know Stéphane had a brother!

Valentine – His twin brother, in fact.

Maurice – Your new boyfriend is Stéphane's twin brother?

Françoise – She never said he was her boyfriend. We just assumed... He's not your boyfriend, is he?

Valentine – Of course not! He only arrived in Paris this morning... But he can explain everything himself.

Valentine opens the bedroom door.

Valentine – Stefano, could you come out, please?

Françoise – He's called Stefano?

Stéphane comes back into the room.

Valentine – This is Stefano, Stéphane's twin brother. He arrived from Rome this morning...

Stéphane looks somewhat taken aback.

Stéphane – Buongiorno...

Her parents are stunned.

Valentine – He's Italian, but he speaks French perfectly, don't you, Stefano?

Stéphane – I did all my schooling in Paris.

Françoise goes over and embraces him.

Françoise – Our deepest condolences, Stefano. I know what it's like to lose a brother.

Maurice – Your brother's dead?

Françoise – No, but I can imagine how awful I'd feel if he were.

Maurice – You haven't got the slightest accent. Where exactly are you from?

Françoise – Next he'll be asking to see your identity papers... My husband's a police officer.

Valentine – It's rather complicated... Stefano is French, but he was born in Rome.

Françoise – But Stéphane was born in Paris, wasn't he?

Valentine – Yes, that's right...

Maurice – That's a bit odd for twins, don't you think?

Valentine – I can see why you're surprised.

Stéphane – Yes, people always are when I tell them.

Maurice – Well?

Valentine – Stefano will explain.

Stéphane – No, no, go ahead. You tell it better than I do...

Valentine – It's your story. Your family's story...

Stéphane – A rather painful story... That's why I don't like talking about it. But if you insist...

Françoise – You don't have to, you know...

Maurice – Well, even with Europe's open borders, I'd like to know how twins can be born in two European capitals two thousand kilometres apart.

Stéphane – It's quite simple, actually... My brother and I were born on a plane, during a flight from Rome to Paris.

Maurice – Really...

Stéphane – And...

Valentine – Stefano was born during take-off, and Stéphane during landing.

Françoise – Ah, I see... So you're the older twin!

Stéphane – And that's why I'm Italian...

Valentine – And Stéphane was French. Well, he was...

Maurice – I see...

Françoise – But you never told us Stéphane had a brother.

Valentine – Because Stéphane didn't know either. He didn't even know who his parents were! That's why he'd never introduced them to me, in fact.

Maurice – Oh, really? Do go on...

Valentine – Well... It's a terrible story... Almost impossible to believe.

Maurice – I can imagine...

Valentine – Stéphane's father was very poor back then.

Stéphane – That's why he and his wife decided to move to France, so he could find work as a builder...

Maurice – By plane...?

Valentine – It was a budget airline, of course.

Maurice – Of course...

Valentine – Anyway, as I said, his wife gave birth to Stefano shortly after take-off from Rome. The cabin crew helped her and everything went well.

Stéphane – Though it wasn't an easy delivery. I was born breech...

Françoise – And I imagine it wasn't a first-class seat.

Valentine – But...

Maurice – But there was another bun in the oven.

Valentine – Exactly! Just as the plane was landing, Stefano's mother needed the toilet, and that's where she gave birth to Stéphane.

Françoise – You're joking!

Valentine – Since his parents were completely broke, they decided they could only keep one of the babies.

Stéphane – Me...

Françoise – How dreadful...

Stéphane – I did warn you.

Maurice – Yes, I'm almost in tears...

Valentine – It was the pilot himself who found the baby in the aircraft toilet...

Stéphane – When he went in to clean it before taking off for Rome again.

Maurice – The pilot...

Stéphane – You know what budget airlines are like. Everyone has to lend a hand...

Françoise – And then?

Valentine – The baby was passed from one person to another... For several years he was brought up by the flight attendants.

Stéphane – Kind women who fed him on whatever was left of the in-flight meals.

Valentine – Then, when he reached school age...

Stéphane – They eventually had to hand him over to social services.

Valentine – Imagine how heartbreaking that was for them.

Stéphane – Naturally, they'd grown very attached to him...

Valentine – Anyway, a few years ago Stéphane contacted social services, hoping to find out who his parents were...

Stéphane – And just days after finally tracing his family, he died following that long illness...

Valentine – Well, after drowning, actually.

Stéphane – Oh, he drowned?

Valentine – Yes, but that's another story...

Françoise – Incredible.

Maurice – Yes... Completely mad...

Françoise – The most incredible thing is how alike they are, isn't it?

Maurice – Yes, it's as if...

Françoise – They were twins.

Maurice – Give him a beard and long hair...

Françoise – Swap the suit and tie for old jeans and a black leather jacket...

Maurice – And replace those bright, intelligent eyes with a vacant grin...

Françoise – Mind you, now I look more closely...

Maurice – What?

Françoise – Stéphane was a bit shorter, wasn't he? Well, not quite as tall...

Valentine – Growing up on budget-airline meals wouldn't have helped his development...

Maurice – And what does this young man do for a living?

Valentine – Stefano... has a very senior position in the food industry.

Françoise – Oh, really...

Maurice – That's certainly more reassuring than being the drummer in a rock band...

Françoise – Maurice, please...

Valentine – I've always known what you thought of Stéphane, Dad. Don't worry.

Françoise – You said it often enough: musicians are losers. And if you must join a band, at least be the singer.

Valentine – In other words, the frontman...

Maurice – The drummer's always the stupidest one in the band. Everyone knows that...

Stéphane *(offended)* – From what I've heard, Stéphane's band wasn't doing too badly...

Françoise – What were they called again?

Stéphane – The Rebels...

Maurice – That's right. The Rebels. What a ridiculous name... With rebels like those, the police could sleep soundly, believe me. They ride the Métro without a ticket and think they're revolutionaries.

Stéphane – I believe they had a tour lined up.

Maurice – A tour! A tour of the bars, perhaps...

Stéphane – Who knows? If the drummer hadn't died so young, they might have made it big...

Françoise – My husband knows nothing about modern music, Stefano. I was very fond of your brother. His death was terribly sad for me...

The baby starts crying again.

Stéphane – And whose baby is that? Are you babysitting, Valentine?

Maurice – That baby?

Françoise – He's your nephew, Stefano!

Maurice – That's right, old chap. You're an uncle now...

Stéphane – My nephew?

Françoise – Yes, Stéphane's son!

Maurice – He didn't know?

Valentine – He's only just arrived... I haven't had a chance to break the happy news to him...

Françoise – It's so sad to think that this child will never know his father...

Stéphane – Why not?

Valentine – Because he's dead!

Stéphane – Oh, of course... How exactly did he die?

Françoise – Has Valentine not told you that either?

Valentine – He only just arrived, I keep telling you...

Françoise – It may be small consolation, Stefano, but your brother died a hero.

Stéphane – Really?

Valentine – Perhaps we needn't go into the details... It's all still very raw for Stefano. It might be too much for him to take in at once...

Stéphane – We've come this far...

Françoise – Stéphane died saving a mother and her two children from drowning.

Stéphane – You're kidding?

Françoise – He managed to get all three of them safely ashore, but exhausted by his efforts, he was swept away by the currents himself...

Stéphane – So Stéphane was a hero...

Maurice – A remarkably modest hero, too.

Françoise – Before disappearing beneath the waves, he managed to call out to the family he'd saved that under no circumstances did he want the media to report his sacrifice...

Maurice – Which is why there was nothing in the newspapers.

Françoise – Otherwise I'm sure he'd have been awarded the Legion of Honour.

Maurice – No doubt. They give it to everyone these days.

Stéphane – You've brought tears to my eyes... Valentine, it must be a comfort to know you carried the child of such an extraordinary man for nine months. And that your son will always be there to remind you of your love for Stéphane.

Françoise – My daughter even wrote to the President of the Republic asking permission to marry Stéphane posthumously, but she hasn't had a reply yet...

Stéphane – Oh, really...?

Maurice – We had a little collection for a funeral wreath.

Françoise – But there wasn't even a funeral. They never found the body...

Maurice – And as we didn't know his family...

Françoise – Just a small, private ceremony for the three of us... It was very moving...

Stéphane – I can imagine...

Maurice – Naturally, it's hard to grieve in circumstances like these.

Françoise – And to think you'll never get to know your brother either...

They sigh.

Maurice – Still, the child has lost a father but gained an uncle.

Françoise – An uncle who, by a miracle, looks exactly like his father.

An awkward silence.

Valentine – Can I get you something to drink?

The baby starts crying again.

Françoise – I think he's the one who needs a drink first...

Maurice – Isn't there a flight attendant on board who could breastfeed him?

Valentine – I'll see what I can do...

She goes out.

Françoise – I'll come with you...

Françoise follows her. An awkward silence.

Maurice – What a story...

Stéphane – Yes...

Another silence.

Maurice – Tell me, young man...

Stéphane – Stefano.

Maurice – Stefano, that's right. Now, Stefano, I'm a bit embarrassed to bring this up with you, especially at a time like this, but...

Stéphane – Please, go ahead. I'm practically family now, aren't I?

Maurice – Right... Well, I lent your brother the money to pay for his wedding to my daughter.

Stéphane – Oh, really...?

Maurice – He didn't have a penny to his name...

Stéphane – You know what artists are like...

Maurice – Quite... The reception... The restaurant... Even the wedding dress... It all costs a fortune...

Stéphane – I'm sure...

Maurice – And since the wedding never happened, I wondered whether... I might be able to get my deposit back.

Stéphane – I see...

Maurice – You wouldn't happen to know what he did with the money, would you?

Stéphane – Frankly, I haven't a clue... But of course, if...

Maurice – Fifteen thousand euros is a lot of money.

Stéphane – It certainly is...

Maurice – Almost the price of a new car... And as it happens, I need to replace mine soon...

Stéphane – I'll see what I can do. I promise...

Maurice – Good. After all, I suppose you'll be inheriting from your brother now.

Stéphane – Assuming his debts don't exceed his assets...

Françoise and Valentine return.

Françoise – He only wanted his pacifier... He must be teething. *(To her daughter.)* Haven't you lost weight?

Valentine – I don't know...

Françoise – Well, you look lovely. Motherhood suits you. Doesn't it, Stefano? Isn't my daughter radiant?

Stéphane – Yes, absolutely...

Françoise – Life goes on, doesn't it? We mustn't let adversity get the better of us.

Maurice – It's like falling off a horse. You have to get straight back on, or else...

Françoise – Are you married, Stefano?

Stéphane – Er... no. Not as far as I know. I mean... not yet.

Maurice – And between us, now he's no longer here, we can say it: that Stéphane wasn't really the man for you.

Françoise – Maurice! Show some respect for the dead.

Maurice – In my job you meet all sorts. You develop a sixth sense. And him... I always thought he'd end up in prison...

Stefano pulls his sleeve down over his supposed electronic tag.

Françoise – But he died a hero...

Maurice – Dying a hero is all very well. Living as a decent man is better. The truth is he got my daughter pregnant and then ran off just before the wedding!

Françoise – But... he died!

Maurice – Yes, well, that's an easy excuse, isn't it? You, on the other hand, strike me as a serious young man, Stefano. A man of your word...

Stéphane – Thank you...

Maurice – Why don't you marry this one, Valentine? He's the perfect son-in-law!

Françoise – Maurice, please... A little tact... Though it is true that Stefano is very handsome... Don't you think so, Valentine?

Valentine – Marry the twin brother of the father of... That would be rather odd, wouldn't it?

Françoise – On the other hand, you wouldn't have much adjusting to do. He's exactly the same!

Maurice – Only better...

Valentine – No, really. Stefano is not my type at all.

Stéphane – That's not very nice to hear...

Valentine – Sorry, but... I've been through quite a lot lately. I don't think I'm ready to...

Maurice – In that case, perhaps he'd suit your sister. What do you say, Françoise?

Françoise – Really, Maurice! It's not up to me! You sound like a camel dealer trying to get rid of half his herd...

Maurice – You could at least show him a photograph of Valentine's sister, so he can get to know his nephew's family!

She takes a photograph from her handbag and shows it to Stefano.

Françoise – I always carry pictures of my children... Here she is in her swimsuit on the French Atlantic coast. That's where we spend our holidays, at the Blue Waves campsite.

Valentine – Mum...

Stéphane – Oh yes, that swimsuit certainly shows her to advantage.

Françoise – Did you know she was crowned Miss Campsite?

Stéphane – I can quite believe it...

Maurice – Shall we give her a call? She could come over for tea.

Françoise – Then she could meet Stefano...

Maurice – And the wedding's already paid for...

Valentine – What wedding?

Stéphane – I'll explain later...

Maurice – Well? What do you say, Stefano? May I call you Stefano?

Stéphane – Of course.

Maurice – After all, you're practically one of the family already, aren't you? So?

Stéphane – She really is very pretty...

Valentine – All right, that's enough... And I doubt she'd be re-elected Miss Campsite these days. Even after a second round of voting. That photograph's ten years old, and she's put on at least a kilo a year since then...

Françoise – You're exaggerating...

Maurice – Or are you a bit jealous? I thought Stefano wasn't your type at all...

Valentine – Anyway, I think it's a bit early to organise a big family reunion. Things are complicated enough already, aren't they? Stefano's only just found out his brother is dead...

Françoise – You're right, darling...

The baby starts crying again.

Françoise – I'll see to him... *(With a meaningful look.)* Coming, Maurice?

Maurice – What for?

Françoise – These two young people must have plenty to talk about...

Maurice – No funny business, mind!

Françoise and Maurice leave the room. As soon as they are gone, Valentine turns on Stéphane in exasperation.

Valentine – So now you want to sleep with my sister too?

Stéphane – I only said that to see how you'd react. You're the one I want to spend the rest of my life with, Valentine. Especially now we have a child...

Valentine – We?

Stéphane – He is my son, isn't he?

Valentine – Isn't it a bit late to start worrying about that?

Stéphane – All right, I messed up. But I'm here now. I've got a proper job and...

Valentine – I'll never trust you again, Stéphane. As soon as my parents leave, you're going too. And you are never coming back. Understood?

Stéphane – I can't live without you, Valentine. I'd rather end it all.

Valentine – Well, go ahead!

Stéphane – You don't take me seriously, do you?

Valentine – You haven't exactly given me much reason to take your word for anything so far.

Stéphane heads for the door.

Stéphane – Very well. You'll never hear from me again... Except in the local news, perhaps. Since Stéphane supposedly drowned, I'll throw myself into the Seine. Then you won't even have to lie to your parents any more... Goodbye, Valentine...

Valentine grabs his wrist to stop him.

Valentine – No, wait...

Stéphane – It would be better for everyone if I really were dead, Valentine. Believe me...

Valentine – Stay... Please...

Stéphane tries to leave anyway. In the struggle, his supposed electronic tag comes off in Valentine's hand. Astonished, she examines it.

Valentine – What's this? Are you kidding me?

Stéphane – Let me explain...

Valentine holds up the object.

Valentine – An electronic tag? Isn't this a bicycle lock?

Stéphane – What matters is that I love you, Valentine. Look, the combination is your date of birth!

Valentine – So you were never in prison, were you?

Stéphane – I went on tour with the band, but I fell out with the lead singer.

Valentine – Marco?

Stéphane – You know him?

Valentine – Well, a little... You introduced us, didn't you?

Stéphane – But more than anything I realised how much I missed you. And that it was time to give up my teenage dreams and build something solid with you.

Valentine – I'm thrilled that marrying me means the end of all your teenage dreams... A real fairy tale...

Stéphane – Come on, try to understand me! I'm only human... The prospect of getting married... It terrified me. I panicked and ran away. I know it was cowardly, and I hurt you terribly. But I've grown up. I promise.

Valentine – Yes... A little trip away can work wonders for your maturity...

Stéphane – I still don't deserve you, Valentine. But now that we've got a child together... That's a sign, isn't it?

Valentine – That's what you call a sign?

Stéphane – Give me a second chance, Valentine... This child needs a father, surely!

Valentine – I should remind you that as far as my parents are concerned, the child is an orphan...

Stéphane – I'd forgotten that...

Valentine – Even though you supposedly died a hero, my father still thinks you're a traitor. If you come back as a deserter... And if he happens to have his service pistol on him...

Stéphane goes pale.

Stéphane – Maybe we don't have to tell them we've been lying...

Valentine – Oh, really? How do we manage that?

Stéphane – Since your parents are so keen on him, why don't you marry Stefano? He's the perfect son-in-law!

Valentine – Don't you think the perfect-son-in-law suit is a little too big for you? In the long run, anyway... And I suppose you're not really a senior executive in the food industry either.

Stéphane – Let's say I made it sound a bit more impressive...

Valentine – More impressive?

Stéphane – I deliver pizzas. But only temporarily...

Valentine – Well, it's still the food business... So what do you suggest?

He thinks.

Stéphane – I've got an idea!

Valentine – I'm not sure whether that should reassure me...

Maurice and Françoise return, interrupting them.

Françoise – It's amazing how much they look like you!

Maurice – You think so...?

Françoise – Oh yes, there's definitely a resemblance... Are you quite sure you're not the father?

Stéphane pretends to answer his mobile phone.

Stéphane – Excuse me, there's a call... Buongiorno. Sì. Pronto. Mamma mia... Forgive me, it's important.

He goes out onto the landing.

Maurice – I hope it's not another family tragedy...

The baby cries.

Françoise – I think it's time for his bottle...

Valentine – I'll go...

Valentine exits.

Maurice – Do you believe that story about the twins?

Françoise – Don't you?

Maurice – Of course not. But it's hilarious...

Françoise – Why didn't you say anything?

Maurice – Let's let them dig themselves in a little deeper. See just how far they can go before they hit rock bottom...

Françoise – Anyway, that baby can't possibly be Stéphane's. He was born ten months after Stéphane disappeared.

Maurice – Oh, really?

Françoise – Besides, doesn't the baby look rather more like the band's singer than the drummer?

Maurice – Marco?

Françoise – You're right. In a rock band, the dominant male is the singer...

Maurice – On the other hand, if that idiot is willing to play the father...

Françoise – He's not the perfect son-in-law, but he's the only candidate we've got.

Maurice – And there's no guarantee that silly girl of ours will find another man soon enough to get an electronic tag around his ankle.

Françoise – Sorry?

Maurice – A wedding ring on his finger, if you prefer...

Stéphane returns with a peculiar expression.

Maurice – Everything all right, Stefano? You look as though you've seen a ghost...

Stéphane – You're not far off...

Maurice – Really...?

Stéphane – I've just had the most extraordinary phone call.

Françoise – From...?

Stéphane – My brother. Stéphane!

Maurice – Stéphane?

Françoise – But... he's dead!

Maurice – Don't tell me there's mobile reception in the afterlife now?

Stéphane – As it turns out, Stéphane isn't dead!

Maurice – No!

Françoise – But how is that possible?

Maurice – They never did find his body...

Françoise – Where is he?

Stéphane – Downstairs, at the café. He's waiting for me to break the news gently to Valentine before he comes up. Just imagine the shock it will be for her...

Maurice – Oh yes, I'm sure... Quite a shock...

Valentine returns from the bedroom.

Valentine – What's with the faces? Has something happened?

Stéphane – You'd better sit down, Valentine...

Valentine – I'm perfectly happy standing. What's so important?

Françoise – You're going to have to be brave, darling.

Stéphane – Stéphane is alive...

Valentine – You... You mean he isn't dead.

Stéphane – Exactly.

Valentine – Oh my God, that's terrible... I mean, wonderful... Are you sure?

Stéphane – I've just spoken to him on the phone...

Valentine – I think I'm going to faint...

She pretends to swoon, but Stéphane catches her in his arms. Their lips almost meet.

Valentine *(pulling herself together)* – No, Stefano, nothing can ever happen between us now...

Stéphane – You're right...

Maurice – It's like a television soap opera.

Valentine – No, I mean... How is it possible?

Françoise – That's what I asked too...

Stéphane – He'll tell you everything himself. He's waiting downstairs for me to give him the signal to come up.

Maurice – Shall I give him a call? What's his number?

Stéphane – I'll go and fetch him. That would be better...

Stéphane leaves.

Valentine – It's incredible, isn't it?

Maurice – Oh yes, incredible... That seems to be the word of the day...

Valentine – I can't wait to find out how something like this could have happened...

Françoise – What a saga!

Maurice – Are you sure you'll be all right?

Valentine – I don't know... I hope he hasn't changed too much...

Maurice – Well... He has been in the water for a year...

Françoise – You don't seriously think...?

Maurice – I don't know... I'm trying to imagine...

Françoise – There must be an explanation...

Maurice – And I have to say I'm dying to hear it...

Stefano returns as Stéphane, wearing jeans, a leather jacket and a fake moustache.

Stéphane – Hello, Valentine...

Valentine – Is it really you, Stéphane?

Stéphane – It's me, I promise...

Françoise – Didn't he used to have a beard?

Valentine throws herself into Stéphane's arms.

Valentine *(aside)* – Aren't you overdoing it a bit? You look like you've robbed a costume shop...

Stéphane – There's a joke shop downstairs. I thought it would make it more convincing...

Valentine – You've changed so much...

Maurice – Yes, and not for the better...

Françoise – The beard suited him better, actually. *(Her parents look appalled.)* But where's Stefano?

Stéphane – He preferred to slip away... I gathered he'd fallen in love with your

daughter and was about to propose to her.

Françoise – How awful...

Maurice – One man's good fortune...

Stéphane – He's heartbroken. But naturally he's decided to stand aside for his brother.

Valentine – Perhaps we'll never see him again...

Maurice – What a pity...

Françoise – It's a tragedy...

Maurice – A melodrama, certainly.

Françoise – You should write a play about it. I'm sure it would be a success...

Maurice – But you still haven't explained how a man declared drowned can turn up alive twelve months later.

Stéphane – I admit it's rather surprising...

Maurice – At this stage, I doubt there's anything left that could surprise us...

Stéphane – I was pulled out of the water unconscious at the mouth of the Seine, in Dieppe.

Françoise – I thought the Seine flowed into the sea at Le Havre.

Maurice – That's probably what makes the story even more extraordinary...

Stéphane – Anyway, I'd lost my memory completely. Some nuns took me into their convent. I've only just got my memory back... And of course, I came straight here.

Maurice – Well, all's well that ends well, then!

Françoise – Now you can finally get married!

Maurice – Yes, it'll all end with a wedding, like a fairy tale. And since the reception is already paid for... Reassure me, Stéphane: you may have lost your memory, but you haven't lost the money I gave you to marry my daughter, have you?

Stéphane – Well, the thing is...

Valentine – What's all this about?

Stéphane – I'll explain, darling...

Maurice – As long as you put a ring on her finger, everything will be fine. *(Aside.)* Otherwise I might just put handcuffs on your wrists...

Françoise – It'll be strange having both twins at the wedding, though.

Stéphane – Under the circumstances, I'm not sure Stefano will want to attend the

wedding...

Valentine – Well, you'll understand that we need a little time alone together now...

Françoise – Of course, sweetheart... Come on, Maurice, let's go...

Maurice – See you soon, then... Stéphane.

Her parents leave.

Valentine – Well, congratulations...

Stéphane – Do you think they believed it?

Valentine – When you're dealing with a professional liar, who knows... But tell me, what's this money Dad supposedly gave you for our wedding?

Stéphane – Well...

Valentine – Don't tell me you used it to go on tour with the Rebels!

Stéphane – I'll pay it back, Valentine. Even if I have to work full-time for the rest of my life...

Valentine – That's what most people do to support a family, you know. *(A baby cries.)* Anyway, you're going to pay for this one way or another...

Valentine goes out and returns carrying a baby basket.

Stéphane *(tenderly)* – What's his name, by the way? You haven't told me...

Valentine – This one's Orpheus.

Another baby cries. She goes to fetch a second basket.

Valentine – And this little girl is Eurydice... They're twins. Must run in the family... Probably genetic...

Stéphane – Orpheus and Eurydice... Oh, shit... Hell... I mean, how wonderful!

Valentine – Yes, you'll see... When they both start crying at once, it's like listening in stereo.

He bends over the two baskets, looking worried.

Stéphane – And... are you sure they're both mine?

Valentine – Who knows...?

Stéphane – Funny... That one vaguely reminds me of somebody...

Both babies cry together. Valentine struggles to calm them. The doorbell rings.

Valentine – Can you answer that? I'm a bit busy, as you can see... It's probably my parents again. They must have forgotten something.

Stéphane – I'll get it.

He disappears briefly to open the door, then returns with a huge smile.

Stéphane – You'll never guess... It's Marco!

Valentine stares at him in astonishment.

Valentine – Marco?

Rock music, possibly Deep Purple's Smoke on the Water.

Blackout.

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

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