
La Comédiathèque
The window across the courtyard
Jean-Pierre Martinez
comediatheque.net

**This text is made available to read free of charge.
However, an authorization must be requested from the author
prior to any public performance, whether by professional or amateur
companies. To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez
and to request an authorization to represent one of his works:
https://comediatheque.net**

The Window across the Courtyard

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

An ageing novelist on the verge of suicide is visited by a young woman who says she has lost her cat. Their encounter is about to change his life...

Characters
Alexandre
Madison

© La Comédiathèque

The living room of an apartment in Paris, with a bohemian atmosphere. An old typewriter and several files stand on a small desk. Alexandre enters, a writer in his sixties or older, dressed with studied casualness. He is holding a rope with a noose. He looks up at the ceiling, climbs onto a chair and apparently searches for somewhere to secure the rope. Finding nothing suitable, he climbs down. He sits at the desk with a weary sigh. Opening a drawer, he takes out a packet of cigarettes and puts one to his lips. Instead of lighting it, he lays it on the desk and takes a pistol from the drawer. He gazes at it for some time. There is a faint knock at the door. Absorbed in thought, he does not hear it. He presses the barrel to his temple. Another knock, slightly louder. He still hears nothing. He hesitates, as though about to pull the trigger. He closes his eyes... At that moment a young woman suddenly appears before him. This is Madison, a student in her twenties or thirties, rather conventionally dressed.

Madison *(shouting) – No!*

Startled, Alexandre jumps to his feet and points the pistol at Madison.

Alexandre – One move and you're dead!

Madison – Please, don't shoot!

Alexandre – Hands up!

The young woman immediately raises her hands.

Madison – There, you see? I'm not armed... Now please put the gun down.

Seeing that she poses no threat, he lowers the pistol.

Alexandre – What the hell are you doing here? And how did you get in?

Madison – I'll explain... Just give me a moment to catch my breath...

Alexandre – Are you out of your mind? You nearly gave me a heart attack!

Madison – I'm sorry, the door was slightly open, and...

Alexandre – And you thought that was an invitation to walk into my home?

Madison – No, but...

Alexandre – What do you want? To rob me? There's nothing worth stealing here, believe me.

Madison – I'm your neighbour.

Alexandre – Next door? The woman next door is eighty...

Madison – Across the courtyard... *(She points towards an imaginary window on the audience side.)* That window over there belongs to my flat.

Alexandre – Opposite? Nobody's lived there for years.

Madison – Somebody does now.

Alexandre – All right... So?

Madison – My cat's gone missing... I was wondering whether you'd seen him... Or perhaps taken him in... If he'd come in uninvited, as I did...

Alexandre – No, I haven't. Apparently your cat has better manners than you.

She looks genuinely distressed.

Madison – He's been missing for two days. I've put posters all around the neighbourhood with his name and picture. Haven't you seen them?

Alexandre – I hardly ever go out... And I never look at that sort of notice. Besides, I'm no good at telling one cat from another...

She walks a few steps into the room.

Madison – Tofu! Tofu!

Alexandre – Why are you shouting like that? What's wrong with you?

Madison – His name's Tofu.

Alexandre – You've called your cat Tofu? You must be joking...

Madison – Not at all. Why?

Alexandre – Fine. Your cat's called Tofu, and he hasn't come home for two days. Surely that's not the end of the world?

Madison – Of course it's serious! If I don't find him soon, he'll die... He's an indoor cat, you see. He isn't equipped to survive out on the streets.

Alexandre – How terribly unfortunate. In my day cats lived in the country, or at least in houses with large gardens. They spent their days hunting mice and only came home when they'd caught nothing, to be fed, stroked a little and allowed to sleep on the sofa...

Madison – Well, this cat doesn't eat mice. He's vegetarian.

Alexandre – Sorry?

Madison – I don't eat meat, and neither does my cat.

Alexandre – What does he eat, then?

Madison – Vegetable biscuits! I eat vegetable biscuits too.

Alexandre – You eat cat biscuits?

Madison – Sometimes, yes. Not the cat's, obviously.

Alexandre – A vegetarian cat... I didn't even know they existed. Is that why he's called Tofu?

Madison – Yes... And because he's a bit of a fool. Tofu the fool.

Alexandre – And naturally, giving up meat was his own personal decision?

Madison – Well, he's never complained.

Alexandre – And do you suppose they feed vegetable biscuits to lions and tigers in circuses these days?

Madison – I don't know... In any case, I'm against keeping animals in circuses.

Alexandre – But you're happy to keep cats indoors...

Madison – I take it you don't have any pets.

Alexandre – No. I hate the whole idea of keeping pets. The whole idea of domestication, for that matter. *(Menacingly)* I've remained a wild creature myself...

Not remotely intimidated, she looks around the room.

Madison – So you definitely haven't seen my cat?

Alexandre – No, I haven't seen your vegan cat. And if you don't mind, I think this ridiculous conversation has gone on long enough.

She suddenly freezes.

Madison – Shh! Be quiet!

Alexandre – I beg your pardon?

Madison – Didn't you hear a cat meowing?

Alexandre – Meowing? No, not at all. Though I'm beginning to go a bit deaf, you know. When you reach my age you'll discover that it has its advantages. Especially if you have noisy neighbours...

Madison – I'm very quiet, I promise. I've been living right opposite you for over a month, and you still thought the flat was empty.

Alexandre – Indeed, I hadn't noticed you were there, and I'd rather things stayed that way. So unless there's anything else, perhaps you could let me get back to what I was doing and go and look for your cat...

Madison – All right. I won't disturb you any longer...

Alexandre – Thank you.

She makes as if to leave, then changes her mind.

Madison – But... I don't feel right leaving you like this.

Alexandre – Like what?

Madison – Well... When I came in, you were...

Alexandre – I was what?

Madison – You didn't seem to be feeling very well...

Alexandre – What gives you that idea?

Madison – You were holding a gun to your head.

He looks in surprise at the pistol, which is still in his hand.

Alexandre – Oh, that... So what?

Madison – Well... You seem a little... depressed.

Alexandre – Depressed? Listen, young lady, when I was your age our generation had a motto: live fast, die young and leave a good-looking corpse. Ring any bells?

Madison – James Dean...

Alexandre – We had sex without condoms, rode motorcycles without helmets and swallowed all sorts of illegal substances whose ingredients, believe me, nobody could have identified... Fifty years later, the handful of old people like me who survived that glorious era are marching in the streets because they're frightened of a vaccine... And you expect me not to be depressed?

Madison – I understand...

Alexandre – No, I don't think you do... But if you're unfortunate enough to reach my age, you will. Old age is a shipwreck.

Madison – De Gaulle...

Alexandre – Chateaubriand said it before him... But you're right. Growing old means going from Rebel Without a Cause to Memoirs from Beyond the Grave.

Madison – That's rather nicely put.

Alexandre – Yes... The trouble is that young people these days behave like old people already.

Madison – But hasn't every generation of young people wanted to change the world?

Alexandre – This one doesn't want to change the world. It just wants to save the planet. And it's not doing terribly well...

Madison – Did you manage to change the world?

Alexandre – No, but at least we had a hell of a good time.

Madison – You don't seem to be enjoying yourself much any more...

Alexandre – Neither do you, apparently. Otherwise you wouldn't be in a relationship with a cat...

Madison – At least I'm not alone...

Alexandre – And you really think you'll save the planet by feeding a helpless carnivore vegetable biscuits when he never asked for them?

Madison – I don't know... But surely you have to save the planet before you can change the world? What's the point of starting a revolution aboard the Titanic?

Alexandre – In any case, I envy everyone of my generation who died before thirty. Can you picture Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin in a retirement home, discussing whether a vaccine might be dangerous between games of Scrabble? I'd rather die than see that...

Madison – Oh, don't say that...

Alexandre – Unfortunately, literature isn't very rock and roll. Most writers die in their beds.

Madison – Are you a writer?

Alexandre – That's none of your business... I don't even know why I'm telling you all this. I don't know you... And why are you still here, anyway?

He puts the pistol back in a drawer.

Madison – You could have hurt yourself...

Alexandre – I could have killed you, too... Breaking into someone's home is always risky. I'd have pleaded self-defence, and probably walked free... *(She appears to feel faint. He notices and becomes concerned.)* Are you all right?

Madison – Sorry... It'll pass... Could I have a glass of water?

He hesitates briefly.

Alexandre – Sit down for a moment. I'll get you some...

He goes out. She immediately perks up and takes the opportunity to inspect the room. She picks up a framed photograph of a woman from the desk and studies it, then hastily puts it back when he returns and offers her a glass of water.

Madison – Thank you...

She takes the glass and drains it in one go.

Alexandre – Better?

Madison – Yes, thank you...

He makes an effort to soften his manner.

Alexandre – I'm sorry about the welcome... I'm not used to having people round any more...

Madison – So you live alone as well?

Alexandre – Is it that obvious?

Madison – From what you've just said, I imagine you don't have children either.

Alexandre – What makes you think I don't have children?

Madison – Do you?

Alexandre – No... And when I look at the world today, I'm glad of it...

Madison – Yes...

Alexandre – If you want to save the planet, perhaps you should start by not having any more children.

Madison – But then... can you save humanity by stopping humanity from reproducing?

Alexandre – And to think France is probably one of the best places in the world to live...

Madison – That's precisely why I decided to settle in your country...

Alexandre – You're not French?

Madison – My name's Madison. I'm American.

Alexandre – But you speak French perfectly, without the slightest accent...

Madison – My grandmother was French. She taught me the language of Molière. I came to Paris to study literature at the Sorbonne.

Alexandre – And it's pure coincidence, then, that our paths crossed today... Madison.

Madison – Your name's Alexandre, isn't it?

Alexandre – How do you know?

Madison – I saw your name on the mailboxes downstairs. Alexandre Delacroix... Are you related to...?

Alexandre – The painter? Not at all.

Madison – The novelist!

Alexandre – You're American, and you've heard of Alexandre Delacroix... whom nobody in France even remembers.

Madison – You're exaggerating. Everyone knows Alexandre Delacroix. Your reputation extends far beyond France, at least among people who care about literature. So...?

Alexandre – Yes... That's me.

Madison – Really? Alexandre Delacroix, the legendary author of several masterpieces of twentieth-century literature!

Alexandre – If you say so...

Madison – The mysterious novelist who's become a recluse, hasn't published anything for years and refuses every interview... Is it really you?

Alexandre – Something tells me you knew that before you barged in here. Am I wrong?

She hesitates.

Madison – No. I admit it...

Alexandre – So you invented this business about a cat to get an interview...

Madison – The cat is real, I swear. But it's true that when I moved into the flat opposite, I had something else in mind.

Alexandre – You deliberately rented a flat across from mine so you could spy on me?

Madison – Spy on you? Absolutely not! I've always admired your books. When I arrived in Paris, I tried to contact you, but your agent told me you weren't seeing anybody.

Alexandre – And which part of that message was unclear?

Madison – I crossed the Atlantic hoping to meet you. I needed somewhere to live. The flat opposite yours happened to be available, so I seized the chance...

Alexandre – You're completely mad! If you don't leave me alone, I'll report you for harassment. What exactly do you want from me? Are you a journalist?

Madison – I'm a student, as I told you. I wrote my master's thesis on your work in New York. Then I decided to continue my research in Paris, because most of your novels are set here. You know, to Americans, Paris is the most romantic city in the world.

Alexandre – And you think that sort of cliché will unlock the hidden meaning of my novels?

Madison – Would you like to hear the title of my thesis?

Alexandre – No.

Madison – 'The Figure of Absence in the Fictional World of Alexandre Delacroix.'

Alexandre – You've understood me perfectly... What I like most about most people, you included, is their absence. Which is why I'm asking you to leave.

Madison – When you study a living writer, it's only natural to want to meet him. To understand him a little better, and perhaps understand his writing better by learning about his life.

Alexandre – That's a mistake, I assure you. Better to study the books and know nothing about their author. A great many fine writers were very small-minded people. Some were absolute bastards. The same goes for artists and scientists. That's life. Getting to know a genius rarely improves your opinion of them... Not that I regard myself as a genius, mind you...

Madison – I appreciate your modesty, but still... An exclusive interview with the author of Chronicles of the Latin Quarter would be the crowning achievement of my research.

Alexandre – You've read it?

Madison – That novel made me want to come and study in Paris. I think it's your finest book.

Alexandre – It certainly wasn't my biggest seller...

Madison – I imagine it's largely autobiographical.

Alexandre – As I told you, that's of no interest to the reader...

Madison – And then there's that mysterious manuscript you've supposedly been working on for years...

Alexandre – I'm not writing anything. It's a story my publisher keeps alive so people won't forget me entirely and might carry on buying the old books. In any case, I won't give an interview. Not to you or anyone else. *(He moves towards her threateningly.)* Now get out!

Instead of leaving, she stands her ground.

Madison – No!

He is taken aback by her determination.

Alexandre – What do you mean, no?

Madison – I'm not going to let you kill yourself before you've given me that interview. I'd have swum across the Atlantic to get it!

Alexandre – Then take a pedal boat back where you came from, for all I care...

She seems about to faint again.

Alexandre – That's twice you've swooned in front of me now... You read too many romantic novels, young lady. These days, outside the theatre, women don't go fainting every time someone disagrees with them...

Madison – I'm not pretending, I promise.

He hesitates.

Alexandre – Shall I call an ambulance?

Madison – No, but I need to sit down for a moment.

Alexandre – And then you'll go?

Madison – I promise.

She sits down and catches her breath.

Alexandre – I've already given you water... Would you prefer a glass of cognac?

Madison – Are you trying to finish me off?

Alexandre – Too late, unfortunately. I should have shot you straight away and pleaded self-defence. I couldn't deny premeditation now...

Madison – Why do you keep a gun at home?

Alexandre – Originally, to keep unwanted visitors away. Apparently it isn't working...

Madison – Even if you're a bit of a misanthrope, like so many writers... We all need company, don't we?

Alexandre – I can see what's coming. You're going to suggest I get a cat. Are you trying to get rid of yours?

Madison – Don't you find loneliness difficult?

Alexandre – Loneliness... It's like coffee. Bitter at first. Then you get used to it. Then you begin to like it. And in the end, you can't do without it.

Madison – You should publish a collection of aphorisms. I'm sure it would sell very well.

Alexandre – And what does it mean, not being alone? Living with someone and repeating the same banalities year after year? Seeing relatives and friends occasionally, carefully avoiding anything important that might cause an argument? Meeting the neighbours on the stairs and discussing the weather? Talking to your cat and pretending it understands you?

Madison – But when you write, you're speaking to someone.

Alexandre – That's exactly why I stopped.

Madison – I don't believe you.

Alexandre – I'm not asking you to believe me. I'm asking you to leave me in peace...

Madison – So you won't agree to an interview?

Alexandre – I've nothing left to say. Worse, there's nobody left for me to talk to. Some days I don't even feel like speaking to myself.

Madison – That's sad...

Alexandre – That's life... And one way or another, mine is coming to an end...

Madison – Mine might be too...

Alexandre – You're forty years younger than I am. I could be your father.

Madison – Or even my grandfather.

Alexandre – Thank you for pointing that out. Very kind. Anyway, your life has barely begun.

Madison – Yes... But it may be over quite soon...

Alexandre – What do you mean?

Madison – I have a heart condition. The doctors say I may only have a few years left. Perhaps a few months. That's why I came to France, to fulfil one last dream. To meet you...

He is visibly shaken by this revelation.

Alexandre – What do you mean, a heart condition?

Madison – I was born with a heart defect. My heart is very fragile. It could give out at any moment.

Alexandre – Is that why you've been feeling faint?

Madison – The slightest upset makes my heart race, and it could stop beating.

He hesitates.

Alexandre – Don't tell me you've invented this whole story to make sure I don't upset you... and therefore have to agree to an interview.

Madison – I'm afraid not...

Alexandre – I'm sorry.

Madison – It's not your fault.

Alexandre – No, but what irony. I'm old, I don't want anything any more, I'm thinking of ending it all... You're young, with your whole life ahead of you, and your own heart is letting you down...

Madison – There's nothing I can do about it. What's the point of fighting it?

Alexandre – And yet you manage to smile...

Madison – I tell myself that my last few months might be the happiest of my life.

Alexandre – Your enthusiasm for life depresses me. Don't you ever have doubts?

Madison – I haven't time for doubts any more. That's why I pushed my way in...

A pause.

Alexandre – And there's really no hope?

Madison – There is. A transplant. But first you have to find a donor...

Alexandre – I could give you my heart. I've no further use for it... I kill myself and leave you my organs...

Madison – I'm afraid it isn't quite that simple, especially with a heart. It's not like organs we have two of. Kidneys, lungs...

Alexandre – Testicles...

Madison – With a heart, the donor has to be brain-dead...

Alexandre – Brain-dead? Sometimes I wonder whether I already am. And quite a lot of the people around me, for that matter...

Madison – The donor must have died, the heart has to be healthy, and it has to be removed quickly. That combination is terribly rare. And the waiting list for transplants is very long...

Alexandre – Apparently in China they take organs from prisoners sentenced to death. Much more convenient, naturally. First you fix the date of the transplant, then you execute the prisoner that very day.

Madison – That's horrific...

Alexandre – Yes, but that way the recipient has time to fly in quite comfortably from Europe or the United States. Some even do a bit of sightseeing. Of course, it isn't free. I don't know the going rate for a heart in China. Have you looked into it?

Madison – No...

Alexandre – You could probably find out online...

Madison – Thanks.

Alexandre – I'm sorry. I shouldn't joke about that... Especially with you. But humour is all we've got left, isn't it?

Madison – Yes...

Alexandre – Even though what I've just described is anything but a joke...

Madison – I'd rather die than live with the heart of someone on death row, even yours... Well?

Alexandre – Well what?

Madison – Are you really cruel enough to send me away without letting me fulfil my dream?

Alexandre – You're a persistent young woman...

Madison – I'll take that as a compliment.

Alexandre – But how do I know you're telling the truth?

Madison – Who would invent such a story just to get an interview with a writer everyone has forgotten?

Alexandre – So you finally admit that everyone has forgotten Alexandre Delacroix.

Madison – Does that mean yes?

Alexandre – As soon as you show me a medical report proving you're not lying.

Madison – Sorry, I don't have it with me.

Alexandre – You live across the courtyard. Go and fetch it.

Madison – I thought you might take my word for it. I must admit I'm rather disappointed.

Alexandre – If I grant you an interview, that'll only be the beginning. Believe me, I'm a very disappointing person.

She gets up and examines the room. Her eye falls on an old typewriter.

Madison – Do you still use a typewriter?

Alexandre – I wrote every one of my novels on that machine. But don't try to catch me out. I told you I haven't written for years.

Madison – Why not?

Alexandre – Words are like banknotes: put too many into circulation and they lose their value. Look at social media. Everybody posts their little opinions ten or twenty times a day, on every imaginable subject. An inflation of counterfeit currency that's devalued the real thing. Words don't mean anything any more.

Madison – You can't stop people chatting. They used to do it in cafés; now they do it on Facebook. There will always be great writers, though. People like you.

Alexandre – Nobody reads great writers any more. People quote them. Often incorrectly and out of context. The same quotations repeated until every scrap of meaning has been worn away... Copying and pasting has replaced thinking. And emojis have replaced feelings.

Madison – May I quote you in the conclusion to my thesis?

Alexandre – They'll accuse me of elitism. They'll claim I think only a chosen few should be allowed to speak, while everyone else ought to listen in silence. That's not true. I think we should all be silent.

Madison – What do you suggest? A minute's silence?

Alexandre – Not a minute. A whole year. A century. A millennium of silence. Perhaps words would recover their meaning after the flood of verbal diarrhoea we've endured on social media these past few years.

Madison – That's an interesting theory. But isn't it also said that you stopped writing after a broken heart?

Alexandre – People say all sorts of things...

Madison – You don't deny it, though...

Alexandre – That doesn't make it true...

She picks up the photograph from the desk again.

Madison – Who's the woman in this picture?

Alexandre – None of your business.

Madison – She's beautiful.

Alexandre – Even if you really are ill, that doesn't entitle you to pry into my private life.

Madison – I noticed the photograph as soon as I came in... I thought her face looked familiar.

He takes the photograph back, looks at it and replaces it.

Alexandre – She's a woman I loved a long time ago...

Madison – When you were a hippie?

Alexandre – I wasn't much of a hippie, actually. I was open to new ideas, and I smoked the occasional joint. But I looked after my health and had my career in mind even then. You need a certain amount of comfort to write, you know. Sometimes, to be a great writer, you have to remain a bit bourgeois...

Madison – And what about her?

Alexandre – She was a free spirit. She only cared about the present. She took each day as it came.

Madison – Where did you meet her?

Alexandre – On the landing... She lived in the flat opposite, where you live now. Or rather, she shared it with a succession of friends passing through. People from all over the world. Musicians, artists... It was a bit like the Blue House in Maxime Le Forestier's song. The door was always open.

Madison – And since the door was open, one day she went through it and left. Like my cat...

Alexandre – She wanted to travel around the world, try new things, meet new people. The conventional couple wasn't exactly our ideal in those days. It certainly wasn't hers.

Madison – But she loved you...

Alexandre – Yes. In her own way, I think. Although I wasn't the only one she loved...

Madison – Free love...

Alexandre – We didn't want to be like our parents, and we were right. But we hadn't worked out what to invent instead, something that might last... We lived for the moment. We hadn't planned on growing old. And, as it turned out, those who didn't die before thirty have aged terribly. Ever met an elderly beatnik? Not a pretty sight, I assure you...

Madison – So you let her carry on travelling without you...

Alexandre – I couldn't hold her back... Nor did I have the right to. One fine morning, she went away...

Madison – Where to?

Alexandre – Afghanistan. It sounds surreal now, but back then it was a favourite destination on the hippie trail. Hashish was freely available and dirt cheap. A year's work here could pay for a whole year there. There was that fascination with the East as well. Seen from France, Afghanistan was paradise for hippies.

Madison – But you stayed here...

Alexandre – I was already thinking about my future. And I knew my future wasn't in Afghanistan.

Madison – You could have gone with her. For love...

Alexandre – Of course... She might even have let me come along. But her dream wasn't a romantic holiday, much less a honeymoon. Asia was a journey of self-discovery, undertaken with a group. A long way from the cosy, middle-class idea of love between two people...

Madison – So you stayed in Paris... But you never forgot her.

Alexandre – I hoped she'd come back someday. Or at least send me a sign... A postcard... But I never saw her again.

Madison – Didn't you try to find her?

Alexandre – There was no internet then. When somebody chose to disappear from your life, they really disappeared. And the years went by...

Madison – You could try to find her now.

Alexandre – What for? She may be dead. Or married with five children and weighing a hundred and twenty kilos.

Madison – Or she might still be alive, still a beautiful woman, and sometimes think of you.

Alexandre – I'd rather not know. I'd rather keep the image of that beautiful young woman in the photograph. Can you imagine the shock after forty years? You don't notice yourself growing old, but believe me, you certainly notice it in other people.

Madison – I'm not sure I'll live long enough to see myself grow old...

Alexandre – I'm sorry. I shouldn't have said that.

A pause.

Madison – Didn't you hear a meow?

Alexandre – No... Still nothing...

Madison – Perhaps he's hiding somewhere in here...

Alexandre – Let's hope not.

Madison – Promise me that if I die, you'll look after my cat.

Alexandre – Now look here, you're not going to die! Besides, your cat will probably die before you. Well, I imagine so... How long do cats live?

Madison – About fifteen years.

Alexandre – And how old is yours?

Madison – Two.

Alexandre – Oh, I see...

Madison – Well? Would you consider adopting him?

Alexandre – May I remind you that when you walked in, I was holding a gun to my head?

Madison – Exactly. It would give you a reason not to kill yourself...

Alexandre – Having to feed a cat vegetable biscuits and change its litter tray every day, you mean?

Madison – Having someone to care for, yes. Someone who cares about you, needs you, waits at home for you in the evening.

Alexandre – Wait for me? I hardly ever leave the house, especially in the evening...

Madison – Did you really want to end your life earlier, or was it a cry for help?

Alexandre – Well, I don't remember calling you...

Madison – I must have heard you anyway.

Alexandre – It's true. I'm finding it harder and harder to think of reasons to hope.

Madison – Would you like to talk about it?

Alexandre – Given your circumstances, I'd feel rather guilty inflicting my entire catalogue of reasons for despair on you.

Madison – Carrying on fighting when you know you've already lost the war... Isn't that what real courage means?

Alexandre – I never claimed to be brave. I wish I were as brave as you.

Madison – I'm not brave. I simply have no choice. Unlike you.

Alexandre – Me? My only choice now is between a rope to hang myself with and a gun to blow my brains out...

Madison – You're right. You really are depressing...

Alexandre – I warned you. I'm a miserable old fool. I don't know if these times are worse than when I was young. Perhaps I'm simply more clear-sighted. And seeing things clearly doesn't usually make you optimistic.

Madison – On second thoughts, I think I would like that cognac.

Alexandre – Are you sure?

Madison – We've all got to die of something.

He pours two glasses of cognac. They raise their glasses.

Alexandre – To your health! Sorry. I've put my foot in it again...

She smiles. They drain their glasses.

Madison – That could wake the dead.

Alexandre – I haven't had a drink in about ten years. I've no idea how long that bottle's been there. But spirits age well, don't they? Better than people who drink them, anyway...

Madison – It does taste rather strange. Are you sure it's cognac?

He examines the bottle.

Alexandre – I think so... Though I can hardly remember what cognac's supposed to taste like...

Madison – I wish I'd known you when you were young.

Alexandre – Which young man?

Madison – The one who was in love with the woman in the photograph. The one who still had that passion for life...

Alexandre – I'm not sure you'd have liked him.

Madison – I'm sure he was full of enthusiasm and hope.

Alexandre – Full of ambition, at least.

Madison – Have you really no friends left?

Alexandre – I can't stand old people, so I avoid people my age as far as possible. I don't need to be constantly confronted with a mirror of my own decline.

Madison – I'm sure you haven't stopped writing all these years.

Alexandre – Is that why you got me to drink? Hoping I'd start telling you my secrets?

Madison – Writers are meant to write.

Alexandre – All right, it's true. I have carried on writing... But I won't publish anything else.

Madison – Why not?

Alexandre – I've told you. I no longer write to be read. Or perhaps only by future generations. I've nothing to say to readers today.

Madison – Not even to me?

Alexandre – I don't know you. What makes you think I've anything to say to you?

Madison – Perhaps we have more in common than you realise...

Alexandre – Apart from the fact that we're both living on borrowed time?

Madison – At least tell me what your book's about...

He hesitates.

Alexandre – It's a novel... A very personal one.

Madison – Autobiographical, then...

Alexandre – Let's call it autofiction, as people do these days.

Madison – Is that why you won't publish it? Because it's too personal?

Alexandre – I'd rather think of this manuscript as a private diary. I dislike putting myself on display. If I publish it, people will say I've turned into a writer of sentimental romances in my old age...

Madison – I thought you didn't care what people thought of you.

Alexandre – Evidently I haven't quite attained that degree of wisdom.

Madison – Because nobody can.

Alexandre – Don't waste your time writing a thesis about me. Believe me, I'm not worth it.

Madison – It matters to me.

Alexandre – But why? For heaven's sake, live your own life! Especially if it might end at any minute... Besides, I don't believe your story, and you still haven't shown me your medical records.

Madison – If you don't believe me, why have you carried on talking to me?

Alexandre – I thought anyone who made up a story like that must have a very good reason. What is it?

Madison – It's a little complicated...

Alexandre – So you were lying. And there's nothing wrong with your heart.

Madison – Let's just say... my heart trouble is more symbolic than medical.

Alexandre – Why tell me all that, then?

Madison – To make you feel sorry for me, I suppose. You were trying to throw me out...

Alexandre – I could still do that...

Madison – But you won't.

Alexandre – And why not?

Madison – Because you're intrigued...

Alexandre – You say your heart trouble is symbolic. Do you mean... a broken heart?

Madison – In a way... Like you, I've suffered from the absence of someone I love.

Alexandre – And what's any of that got to do with me?

Madison – I'll tell you soon, I promise. But first, there's something I'd like to ask.

Alexandre – Go on, then...

Madison – I'd like to read your manuscript.

Alexandre – And why should I trust you with it?

Madison – Because deep down you want someone to read it and tell you what they think. Writers always write to be read... And acknowledged. To be loved...

Alexandre – The only person whose love I wanted... disappeared from my life over forty years ago.

Madison – Where's the manuscript?

He points to a folder on his desk.

Alexandre – There...

Madison – May I see it?

She reaches for it, but he stops her.

Alexandre – No!

She hesitates. A flicker of sadness crosses her face.

Madison – You were right after all. You really are a miserable old fool. I'll leave you to feel sorry for yourself...

She is about to go.

Alexandre – Wait...

He hesitates, then picks up the manuscript and hands it to her.

Alexandre – You may read it. On one condition.

Madison – I'm listening.

Alexandre – The manuscript stays in this room.

Madison – You're afraid I'll make a copy and publish it without permission?

Alexandre – Take it or leave it.

She accepts the folder and weighs it in her hands.

Madison – This may take a while.

Alexandre – I'm in no hurry. Are you?

Madison – Neither am I.

Alexandre – There's a spare room, if you'd like. I hardly use it any more. All my friends are dead...

Madison – Thank you for your hospitality.

Alexandre – I'll leave you to your reading...

He goes out. She immerses herself in the manuscript.

Blackout.

Madison is still reading the manuscript, sitting in an armchair. She turns the last page, closes the folder and sits lost in thought. Then she gets up and looks towards the window across the courtyard, on the audience side. Alexandre enters carrying two cups of coffee. He places one in front of her.

Alexandre – Here you are... I should warn you, it's decaf. Don't count on it to keep you awake.

Madison – Thank you.

Alexandre – So you couldn't make it to the end...

Madison – I've just finished it.

Alexandre – Already? Impossible. You must have skipped some pages.

Madison – No, I promise...

Alexandre seems troubled by the silence that follows.

Alexandre – You don't have to tell me what you think... Especially if you didn't like it...

Madison – I devoured every word. I didn't sleep a wink all night.

Alexandre – Well... That's a relief... Though I didn't think I'd written a thriller.

Madison – It's your best book. There's a humanity in it that your other novels lacked.

Alexandre – I'm not sure whether to take that as a compliment, considering the rest of my work...

Madison – Your earlier novels were brilliant. This one is deeply moving.

Alexandre – And have you noticed? The subject ties in perfectly with your thesis.

Madison – My thesis?

Alexandre – 'The Figure of Absence in the Fictional World of Alexandre Delacroix.' Forgotten already?

Madison – Of course not. And you're right. The story of a man who, at twenty, chooses to spend his life with only the ghost of his first love for company...

Alexandre – You never forget your first love. Because it reminds you of your youth. Of all your first experiences... You should remain faithful to your first love, even if you can't always remain faithful to the first woman you loved.

Madison – Yes, but there's a danger. You might spend your whole life living in the past...

Alexandre – In any case, we must never give up our dreams. So do you think I should publish it?

Madison – If I say yes, will you?

Alexandre – You're an expert on my work, after all.

Madison – I'm convinced this novel could revive your literary career... I think it deserves the Goncourt Prize.

Alexandre – Don't overdo it. I appreciate your efforts to cheer me up, but you still have to sound convincing...

Madison – I mean every word, I promise.

Alexandre – And you're completely objective, of course.

Madison – You doubt it?

Alexandre – I don't know... Something tells me you didn't come to Paris simply to write a thesis on a novelist who's gone out of fashion.

A pause.

Madison – You're right. I haven't told you the whole truth.

Alexandre – You don't have a heart condition. You don't have a cat. I imagine you're not a student either...

Madison – What is true is that I'm American, and I came to France to meet you.

Alexandre – You've been living in the flat opposite for weeks. Why come to see me now?

Madison – Yesterday morning I saw you from my window, trying to fasten that rope to the ceiling. Then you took out the pistol.

Alexandre – I couldn't find anywhere to tie the rope.

Madison – I was frightened for you. Frightened you might disappear before I had the chance to get to know you. I rushed over here... and made the rest up as I went along.

Alexandre – Quite a performance. You ought to try acting... But you know, in life as in the theatre, you shouldn't always believe what you see behind the curtains. Sometimes it's only an illusion. A projection of our own fantasies...

Madison – So the rope wasn't for hanging yourself?

Alexandre – What if I simply wanted to... put up a chandelier?

Madison – And the pistol?

He takes the weapon from the drawer.

Alexandre – It could be a toy. A replica to frighten burglars... Or merely a cigarette lighter... *(He pulls the trigger and a flame appears at the end of the barrel.)* A lighter I no longer need, in fact. I'm so afraid of dying that I've given up smoking. But I always keep a packet of cigarettes close by, to prove to myself that I can resist temptation. I've given up alcohol as well, and even caffeine. That's how seriously I take my health...

Madison – So you weren't really planning to end your life?

Alexandre – Planning it? Not yet. Wanting to, perhaps. To tell the truth, it's the only desire I have left. The desire to end it all. But suicide takes courage... And I don't have that sort of courage. Or perhaps I'm not quite desperate enough yet. Besides, what's the point? I'll wait my turn, like everyone else...

Madison – So our meeting was just the result of a misunderstanding?

Alexandre – I find it hard to believe anyone would cross the Atlantic merely to interview a writer like me. And I don't believe in coincidence. So why are you here?

Madison – I'll tell you. But first, thank you for giving me the honour of being the first to read your manuscript.

Alexandre – Did you really like it?

Madison – It's a masterpiece. Although I do have one small criticism.

Alexandre – Here we go... I was beginning to wonder... Go on.

Madison – I didn't find the ending entirely convincing...

Alexandre – You're right. It's an unfinished story... As though it needs an epilogue.

Madison – Perhaps I can help you find one...

Alexandre – You write too, do you? Have you come to suggest a collaboration? It's true I'm running a little short of inspiration, but I'm not yet looking for a ghostwriter to write my novels for me.

Madison – No, that's not why I'm here...

Alexandre – And the business about your thesis was invented too. So you didn't stage this whole performance merely for the privilege of a literary conversation with me...

Madison – No. Not only that...

Alexandre – Then why?

Madison – I think the answer lies in the manuscript I've just read. The Window Across the Courtyard... Why that title?

Alexandre – The window across the courtyard belongs to the flat you're living in now. That's where the woman I once loved used to live.

Madison – And she's haunted you ever since she went away.

Alexandre – I often dreamt she'd come back. That one day she'd push open my door, just as you did today...

Madison – That's why you always leave it unlocked...

Alexandre – Sometimes I thought I saw a shadow behind the curtains across the way. When you moved in and I began seeing a light on at night, I imagined it was her...

Madison – But it was only me.

Alexandre – You look a little like her. That's why I drew back when I first saw you. For one moment I thought you were her, aged twenty. Then I remembered that today she'd be about my age...

Madison – It's true. I do look like her.

Alexandre – Don't tell me you're her ghost.

Madison – No. I'm very much alive.

Alexandre – But there's something else, isn't there?

Madison – Yes.

Alexandre – Why did you say her face seemed familiar?

A pause.

Madison – I'm her granddaughter.

Silence.

Alexandre – Her granddaughter...?

Madison – When she left for Afghanistan, she was pregnant. She discovered it shortly after leaving.

Alexandre – Pregnant... With my child?

Madison – Yes.

Alexandre – Why didn't she tell me?

Madison – You've said it yourself. It was another time. She didn't want to force fatherhood on you. She thought she could raise the child on her own. And she did.

Alexandre – I never knew anything about it.

Madison – Neither did I, until fairly recently.

Alexandre – When did you find out?

Madison – A few years ago. When I turned eighteen, my grandmother told me the story. Your love story...

Alexandre – So you would be my granddaughter.

Madison – Yes. I am your granddaughter. *(A pause.)* Don't you believe me?

Alexandre – I do... Strangely enough, after all the lies you've told me, I don't doubt that for a moment.

Madison – I understand it's a lot to take in. Take your time. You don't owe me anything. If that's what you want, I'll leave the way I came and you'll never hear from me again.

Alexandre – Please, stay.

Madison – I'm here.

A pause.

Alexandre – I can understand why she said nothing at the time. But afterwards?

Madison – As I said, she didn't want to impose fatherhood on you. And later she lost touch with you.

Alexandre – Soon after she left, I moved out of this flat. I couldn't bear seeing that window every day, reminding me of her absence.

Madison – She sent you a letter a very long time ago. It came back marked 'No longer at this address'.

Alexandre – I moved back here a few years ago, precisely to write this book. As a way of laying the past to rest.

Madison – But her ghost has never stopped haunting you...

Alexandre – I've known other women, of course. But I've lived my whole life with the memory of that first love. I've never loved anyone else...

Madison – She didn't know if you were married, or had started a family of your own.

Alexandre – I hadn't.

Madison – She heard about you when you became a famous writer.

Alexandre – Part of the reason I worked so hard to succeed in literature was the hope of winning her back. I also thought my reputation might make it easier for her to find me. She could have contacted me then.

Madison – You might have thought she was only coming back because you were a successful novelist... That's what she was afraid of, anyway.

Alexandre – So I have a daughter...

A pause.

Madison – I only half-lied about the illness, too. It was my mother who had a weak heart. She died soon after I was born, without even knowing who her father was.

Alexandre – I'm very sorry to hear that.

Madison – My grandmother brought me up. When I came of age, she wanted me to know who my grandfather was. But she couldn't bring herself to contact you.

Alexandre – So you decided to do it for her. By coming to Paris.

Madison – I couldn't imagine telling you all this in a letter or over the phone. I wanted to meet you first. You had a reputation for being a grumpy recluse. If I hadn't liked you, I wouldn't have said a word. I'd have gone straight back to New York.

Alexandre – But I gave you such a warm welcome that you decided to adopt me...

Madison – Above all, I read this manuscript. I understood that you'd never forgotten the woman in it. My grandmother...

Alexandre – I'm glad you came... And told me how the story ends.

Madison – It isn't quite the end yet... *(Alexandre is shaken.)* Are you all right?

He resorts to humour to conceal his emotions.

Alexandre – I was already depressed about being old, and now you tell me I'm a grandfather.

Madison – Aren't you pleased?

Alexandre – Of course I am... But at the same time I've just found out that I had a daughter, and that she's dead.

Madison – But I'm here... I hardly knew my mother. Now I've found my grandfather.

Alexandre picks up the manuscript.

Alexandre – I'll publish this book. I'll dedicate it to the daughter I'll never know. And to the granddaughter who turned up at my home one day without warning and forced her way in...

Madison – The door was open...

Alexandre – But I still have to find a proper ending for the novel.

Madison – And I can help with that, as I told you.

Alexandre – I don't know how much more my heart can take if you've got any other surprises for me.

Madison – There's one last thing, actually.

Alexandre – Go on. I've come this far...

Madison – My grandmother is still very much alive.

Alexandre – And where does she live now?

Madison – New York.

Alexandre – Then give her a tender kiss for me...

Madison – You can give her one yourself.

Alexandre – You're taking me back to America with you?

Madison – My grandmother came with me. She's in the flat opposite.

A pause. He is plainly overwhelmed.

Alexandre – Now I'm starting to get really scared...

Madison – She's still a very beautiful woman... And she's never forgotten you. She's read every one of your books...

Alexandre – But she didn't want to learn about the author's life.

Madison – You said that didn't matter...

Alexandre – She's the absent figure in this novel.

Madison – Yes, but she hasn't read it yet. She wasn't sure you still remembered her... Or that you still loved her...

Alexandre – I still love her... This book proves it...

He looks out towards the audience, at the window across the courtyard.

Madison – Well? Shall I tell her to come over?

Alexandre – She's crossed the Atlantic to find me. Surely I can cross the courtyard to meet her...

Alexandre kisses Madison.

Madison – I'll let you go on your own. You'll see. Almost nothing has changed behind the window across the courtyard. And the door is still open...

He leaves. Madison remains, looking towards the window.

*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

free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

This text is protected under copyright laws.
Criminal copyright infringement will be investigated
and may result in a maximum penalty of up to 3 years in prison
and a EUR 300,000 fine.

Avignon – April 2023
© La Comédiathèque – ISBN 978-2-37705-916-4
Play available for free download