

La Comédiathèque

**In lieu of
flowers...**

**a comedy by
Jean-Pierre Martinez**

comediatheque.net

**This text is made available to read free of charge.
However, an authorisation 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 authorisation to represent one of his works:
<https://comediatheque.net>**

In lieu of flowers ...

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Stanley's cremation is scheduled for 3:35 PM precisely. Only a handful of close relatives are attending the ceremony since the dearly departed left few cherished memories. But, as they say, authors live on through their work. And this funeral may just turn out to be Stanley's greatest comedy ...

Characters

Fred
Alex
Morgan
Charlie
Chris

*Here, in a version for one man and four women,
but all roles can be performed by men or women.*

Possible castings: 5F, 1M/4F, 2M/3F, 3M/2F, 4M/1F, 5M

© La Comédiathèque

A welcoming room adorned with posters evoking the idea of timeless serenity. Zen decor. Various styles of urns placed on a shelf. Ambient music. Chris enters, dressed in a futuristic style (such as a metallic grey jumpsuit). One could think they're in a design store or the lair of a cult. Chris tidies up the room and rearranges flowers in a vase. Her phone rings. She mutes the sound of the speakers using a remote control and answers.

Chris – Kingston Crematorium, at your service... Mr. Stanley Ramirez? Hold on, let me check my schedule... *(She flips through the pages of an agenda.)* Yes, ma'am, I can confirm that the cremation will take place here. That's right, precisely at 3:35 PM. Very well, ma'am... At your service, ma'am... See you soon, ma'am...

Chris puts away her phone.

Chris – Stanley Ramirez... What a ridiculous name... Anyway... May his ashes rest in peace.

She takes a small box out of her pocket, pours some cocaine onto the edge of her left hand, and sniffs it all.

Chris – Wow, that would wake the dead!

Feeling invigorated, she leaves the room. Fred enters, with a showbiz look, holding a phone in one hand and a rose in the other.

Fred – No, apparently I'm the first one here, and I wouldn't be surprised if I'm the only one. Considering his immense fame as an author, unless all his creditors decided to gather here... Not in hopes of getting repaid. There's little chance he's leaving anything behind other than unpaid debts everywhere. No, just for the pleasure of seeing him disappear once and for all... And why am I here? Honestly, I'm starting to wonder... A lingering remnant of Judeo-Christian upbringing, I suppose. We don't let a loved one go up in smoke without bidding them a final farewell. In fact, I wanted to make sure that this time he was really dead. He's promised to commit suicide so many times... Did I say promised? Yes, threatened to commit suicide, if you prefer... *(He looks at his watch.)* But it shouldn't drag on either. I have a high-speed train in two hours at St Pancras. These things should be wrapped up in half an hour, right? It's not like there's a mass and all the pomp... Yes, at least he spared us that... Uh... Anyway, what was I going to say... Have you thought about my casting proposal for your play? Yes, I know, he's not well-known as an actor yet, but he's very famous as a football player. I'm sure it's a play for him. Yes, I know, it's for the role of Hamlet. Exactly! Even when he was on the English national team, that guy had something Shakespearean about the way he played football, don't you think? Okay, you think about it, and we'll talk again? I have a cremation on the burner, anyway... Alright, let's do that. Okay, catch you later, baby...

He puts away his phone with a sigh.

Fred – Something Shakespearean about the way he plays football... What a load of rubbish!

He examines the room with a skeptical look.

Fred – What the hell is that? I didn't imagine a crematorium looked like this. I hope I didn't get the wrong address. Feels like I'm in the Twilight Zone...

He picks up a surprisingly modern and tacky urn and examines it.

Fred – Looks like a chamber pot designed by Philippe Starck... Or a table trash bin from Ikea... If that's where it ends up... Doesn't really make you want to be cremated...

Chris returns silently while Fred has his back turned.

Chris – Good afternoon, Sir.

Surprised, he startles and turns towards her, almost dropping the urn.

Fred – You scared me...

Chris – Sir...?

Fred – Joystick.

Chris – Sorry.

Fred – Frederick Joystick, that's my name.

Chris – Ah yes...

She takes the urn back from him, fearing he might break it.

Chris – Serenity. It's a model from our latest collection. It's already in high demand...

Fred – Oh, I'm not surprised... So, you are part of the staff, I suppose...

Chris – Chris... How can I help you...

Fred – Yes... Well... I have a friend who's being cremated here, and... I mean, he's already dead, obviously... Well, I assume so... This is a crematorium, right?

Chris – Absolutely, Sir. And if I may say so, one of the best in the region.

Fred – One of the best... Seriously... Don't tell me there's a Michelin Guide for crematoriums too, with a star rating system...

Chris – We simply strive to provide the best possible service to our trusted clients...

Fred – Mind you, with all these plane crashes happening lately, one can't help but wonder if they shouldn't offer a free coffin as a bonus after a certain number of miles... Speaking for myself, I fly frequently, and I must confess that..

Chris (*interrupting*) – Your dear departed made the right choice, believe me. What was his name?

Fred – Stanley. Stanley Ramirez. Yes, I know, his parents should be sued for naming him Stanley. Especially when his last name is already Ramirez... I asked him several

times to use a pseudonym, but he never wanted to. Actually, I wonder if that wasn't already a pseudonym...

Chris – You're family, I assume...

Fred – I'm his agent. Well, I mean, I was... You know, at a certain point, he was a fairly well-known playwright... Well, as well-known as one can be as a playwright... Did you know him by reputation?

Chris – I don't go to the theatre very often...

Fred – Unfortunately, no one goes to the theatre anymore. And it must be said that Stanley Ramirez is probably not entirely unrelated to this general decline in attendance affecting the performing arts... Between you and me, his plays were very bad. And as the well-known saying goes: there's nothing more dramatic than an unfunny comedy...

Chris – For the rose, you didn't need to...

Fred – Oh no?

Chris – The obituary specifically said 'no flowers'.

Fred – Yes, Stanley was a very modest person... He had a few good reasons to be, in fact... But after all... it's just a rose.

Chris – Probably his favourite flower.

Fred – Yes... Probably... But tell me, there aren't many people here.

Chris – The announcement also stated "in the strictest privacy".

Fred – As a playwright, he only had flops. I have a feeling this will be his final one. I hope I won't be the only one in the audience, though. Cremations must be quite eerie, don't you think?

Chris – Other people will surely arrive, don't worry. And we still have a bit of time. The cremation is scheduled for precisely 3:35 PM.

Fred – Ah yes, indeed, very precise... Well, I suppose you have to keep things on schedule. It's like civil weddings. No, I mean... Cremation is a bit like a civil wedding compared to a church wedding. The outcome is equally final, but the ceremony is shorter. Shorter than a church funeral, I mean. It's true, it's incredible, isn't it? When you see all those couples queuing up at the city hall to get married by the Mayor. And afterwards, it's done in five minutes. I mean... So this won't take very long?

Chris – You know, now your friend has all of eternity ahead of him.

Fred – He's a very lucky man. Unfortunately, I don't. I have a business to run...

Chris – It should be finished by 3:45 PM. We have another deceased at 3:50 PM.

Fred – Ten minutes, perfect... Alright, then I'll wait...

Chris – Can I offer you a coffee while you wait?

Fred – Thanks, I'm fine. I already had a line of coke. Just kidding...

Chris – In that case, I'll leave you for a moment. We're a bit busy right now. It's the peak season...

Fred – Oh, really? Oh no, I didn't know there were seasonal variations in your business too. In the theatre, it's the opposite... Winter is still okay... But for live performances, summer is the dead season...

Chris – Excuse me...

Fred – Please, go ahead... I wouldn't want to hold you back...

She exits.

Fred – Rather attractive... for an undertaker...

Not knowing what to do with his rose, Fred places it in one of the display urns. Alex arrives, dressed rather eccentrically and looking hyperactive. She also holds a rose in her hand.

Alex – Oh my God! Please don't tell me I'm too late...

Fred – Too late? Well, Mr. Ramirez has already passed away, didn't you know?

Alex – For the cremation!

Fred – Ah, sorry! No, no, don't worry. It starts at 3:35 PM.

Alex – Are you alone?

Fred – I guess the tabloids haven't gotten wind of Stanley Ramirez's disappearance yet...

Alex places her rose with Fred's in the urn and checks her watch.

Alex – Maybe there's still a way to stop this...

Fred – Stop what?

Alex – My brother's cremation!

Fred – Oh, you're his sister... I didn't know he had a sister...

Alex – Alexandra Smirnoff, but you can call me Alex.

Fred – Smirnoff? And you're related to...

Alex – I told you he's my brother.

Fred – Ah, no, I was thinking more of... Smirnoff, it's a vodka brand, isn't it?

Alex – That's my husband's name. I guess we were meant for each other... And who are you?

Fred – Frederick Joystick, but you can call me Fred.

Alex – Joystick? Don't tell me it was a predestined name for you too?

Fred – As far as my relationship with your brother is concerned, I sometimes wonder... I am... well, I was his agent.

Alex – I didn't know he had an agent.

Fred – Yes, it's true, it's quite surprising that an agent would agree to represent a writer like him, but what can you do? I didn't have much choice back then... Anyway, I'm sorry for your loss.

Alex – Well, I need to speak to someone in charge urgently...

Fred – I'm not sure if there's an emergency service in this kind of establishment, you know...

Fred walks around the reception area, trying different doors.

Alex – This is crazy. All the doors are locked.

Fred – They probably don't want visitors wandering into the secret kitchen... It might not always be a pleasant sight...

Alex – Have you seen anyone?

Fred – Yes, I have... A young woman in some sort of super-tight spacesuit.... She looked like she came out of an episode of Star Trek...

Alex – I didn't ask you how she was dressed! Where is she now?

Fred – I think she'll be back soon... And who knows, if she has superpowers, maybe she'll be able to resurrect Stanley...

Alex gives him a puzzled look.

Fred – You're right, I'm not sure if that's really desirable... So, you're against cremation... Maybe for religious reasons?

Alex – No, why would you think that?

Fred – You said you wanted to stop it...

Alex – Oh no, I don't give a damn about cremation in general. It's just that he promised to give me his liver...

Fred – His liver?

Alex – Well, a piece of it... And when I say "give"...

Fred – You mean sell, I presume?

Alex – How did you know?

Fred – I was his agent, but he also considered me as a friend you could count on...

Alex – I see... He owed you something too...

Fred – Did he mention it to you?

Alex – No. But otherwise, why would you be here?

Fred – I'm a bit embarrassed to ask you this, but... Before he left us to... join his final resting place, did your brother happen to assign you the task of repaying all his creditors? So he could depart in peace, so to speak...

Alex – I'm telling you, he sold me a piece of his liver, and he left without fulfilling my order.

Fred – I see, I just wanted to check... *(Pause)* But for the liver... it's a bit late, isn't it?

Alex – Do you think he's already in...?

Fred – I don't know, but a liver... If it's not refrigerated... Stanley... I mean your dear departed... It's probably not very fresh anymore, right?

Alex – The bastard...

Fred – Personally, I always carry my donor card... In case of an accident and brain death... If my organs can save someone else's life... Do you suffer from a liver disease?

Alex takes a bottle of vodka from her bag and takes a swig straight from the bottle.

Alex – Cirrhosis... My doctor told me, "Either you stop drinking, or you need a liver transplant." I thought a transplant would be easier...

Fred – I understand that. I'm trying to quit smoking myself. Maybe I should have asked your brother to leave me his lungs as compensation... *(He is about to light a cigarette but refrains when she gives him a stern look)* Uh... I suppose it's also prohibited to smoke here...

Alex – Yes, probably...

Fred – It's incredible... Even in crematoriums, smoking is not allowed anymore... Do you think they've also installed a catalytic converter at the exit of...

Alex – The exit of what?

Fred *(embarrassed)* – Well, at the exit of...

Alex's mind wanders.

Alex – So, do you think it's a lost cause for my liver?

Fred – I don't know... Unless they keep them in the fridge before...

Alex – What a jerk! What would it have cost him to leave me his liver before committing suicide?

Fred – So, Stanley took his own life... That's what I suspected, but I didn't dare ask you... It's quite common among writers... Although a bit less among comedy writers...

Alex – Oh no, but I don't really know... I guess... He did have quite a few reasons to commit suicide, didn't he? I mean, when your name is Stanley...

Fred – It's true that in his place, that's probably what I would have done a long time ago... As for myself, I admit that I sometimes consider it...

Alex – Why don't you do it then? With your organ donor card, you could make someone happy...

Fred – Let's just say that after a certain age and a certain amount of trouble, optimism takes over. You tell yourself that, after all, you'll probably be dead before you've paid the bill...

Alex – It's true, when you put it that way, it's much more encouraging...

Arrives Morgan, dressed in a rather vulgar and provocative way, like a prostitute, and definitely not appropriate for a funeral. It could also be a cross-dressing man. She also holds a rose in her hand.

Morgan – I hope I didn't miss the beginning! I came as soon as I found out. I just got back from a little trip to Saudi Arabia... I found the obituary when I opened my mailbox.

Fred – No, no, don't worry, you haven't missed anything. It's at 3:35 p.m...

Morgan – Ah, okay... Actually, I mainly came to pick up a death certificate... But since I'm here, I'll wait until the end of the ceremony...

Alex – Mmm...

Morgan – I hope it won't take too long, though. I'm double-parked...

Alex takes another swig from her bottle of vodka, while the other two look slightly perplexed.

Alex – Cheers...

Morgan – Thanks...

Fred – So, you also came with a rose... Even though it was clearly stated on the obituary 'no flowers'.

Alex (*looking at Morgan*) – They should have also mentioned 'appropriate attire required'...

Fred decides it's better to continue.

Fred – Yes, for the rose, it seems like everyone got the memo... Must be telepathic communication...

Morgan places her rose in the urn with the other two.

Morgan – Even though he never gave me one, I know it was his favourite flower.

Fred – That's probably why we all came with a rose...

Alex – It might also be because of the Pakistani salesman in front of the tobacco shop across the street, selling them for one pound each... (*To Fred*) By the way, who is that one?

Morgan – Sorry... I'm Morgan... The widow...

Alex – The widow? I didn't know I had a sister-in-law.

Morgan – I must admit, I didn't know either.

Fred – There you go... You lose a loved one and discover a family...

Alex – Well, he didn't come to my wedding. I guess he didn't find it necessary to invite me to his.

Morgan – Are you married?

Alex – Does that surprise you?

Morgan – Since you came alone... But maybe your husband isn't a fan of cremation...

Alex – On Fridays, my husband has lunch with his mother, it's non-negotiable. In return, he lets me drink every day of the week.

Fred – For a marriage to last, you have to make mutual concessions.

Morgan – You're right... A lasting marriage starts with temporary concessions and ends with a perpetual grave plot.

Fred (*to Alex*) – Well, he didn't invite you to his wedding, but at least he invited you to his housewarming... I mean, his cremation... (*To Morgan*) So, you're Stanley's wife?

Morgan – Yes, even though apparently, he had forgotten about it a bit...

Fred – Men can be quite forgetful about these things sometimes...

Morgan – To be fair, we got married very quickly after we first met, and we never really lived together. In fact, it wasn't really a love marriage, but rather...

Fred – A sham marriage, I see...

Alex – So, that's how Stanley acquired British nationality...

Fred – But what was his original nationality, exactly?

Alex – Stanley had Guatemalan nationality. I never really understood why. And I was his twin sister...

Morgan – He promised me three thousand euros... as a wedding gift.

Fred – And he never paid you...

Morgan – No...

Fred – And when you wanted to get a divorce, he was the one who asked you for three thousand pounds.

Morgan – Six thousand, to be exact. But how do you know that?

Fred – I believe I can say that I was quite familiar with Stanley's psychology...

Morgan – Anyway, as soon as he got his residence permit, I wanted to regain my freedom.

Fred – And that's when he blackmailed you with the divorce...

Morgan – Since I didn't have the money he was asking for, I thought I would wait a bit. And then, when I managed to gather the amount, through sheer hard work, he had moved out.

Fred – He was someone who moved around a lot.

Alex – Only the traveling people move more than him.

Morgan – It didn't suit me at all to not have any news from Stanley anymore because I planned to remarry with a man older than me...

Fred – I see... An old guy loaded with money suffering from prostate cancer...

Alex – A man whom you had failed to mention you were already married to.

Morgan – So, you can imagine when I received this invitation, I thought...

Fred – That you would save six thousand pounds.

Alex – And a lot of administrative hassle.

Morgan – Provided that I can quickly obtain a death certificate. By the way, do you know what Stanley died from?

Fred – We were hoping you would tell us...

Alex – But if none of us three took care of organising his funeral, who did? I don't see anyone else...

Morgan – Another mystery...

Fred – Stanley was a master of suspense... Except in his plays, unfortunately...

Charlie enters, a woman of uncertain age, dressed in mourning attire, wearing a crucifix around her neck, and her face hidden behind a veil. She first approaches Alex.

Charlie – Good afternoon, Madam. You must be Alexandra, Stanley's sister?

Alex – That depends... What makes you think I could be his sister?

Charlie – The physical resemblance, I suppose. You're the spitting image of poor Stanley.

Morgan – I don't know if you should take that as a compliment...

Alex – And why are you so insistent on me being his sister, exactly? Are you hoping that I'll pay back what he owes you too?

Charlie – Stanley? I owe him a great deal, believe me.

Fred – Seriously?

Morgan – How much, approximately?

Charlie – What I owe Stanley is too valuable to be measured in pounds...

Fred – Oh, yes... That doesn't surprise me...

Alex – But tell me, you seem deeply in mourning... Are you sure you're not overdoing it a bit?

Fred – That's true, just who are you, compared to Jean-Luc, to be in such mourning?

Charlie – My name is Charlie. I am... or rather, I was...

Morgan – Don't tell me you're his widow... Unless that scammer was also a polygamist...

Charlie – Not legally, unfortunately. We had plans to have our union consecrated soon, but fate had other plans.

Fred – That's beautiful what you're saying. You speak as in a soap opera.

Charlie – In any case, he entrusted me with organising his funeral. And settling his estate...

Fred – His estate?

Alex – This must be a joke...

Fred – I'd lean more towards a post-mortem scam.

Morgan (*to Charlie*) – Well, if in a grand gesture of posthumous generosity, Stanley included you in his will, I advise you to accept only subject to inventory.

Charlie – Morgan, I suppose... You're his first wife, aren't you?

Morgan – Why, did he have so many?

Charlie – He spoke a lot about you to me.

Morgan – It was a sham marriage!

Charlie – Nevertheless, I believe I can say that he loved you deeply.

Fred – Alright, and what exactly are these... testamentary dispositions?

Alex – He didn't happen to leave me his liver, did he?

Fred's phone rings.

Fred – Excuse me, I'll be right back... Yes, Victoria... Who? No? And what did he say?

Fred exits.

Charlie – First of all, I want to assure you that Stanley did not suffer.

Alex – Well...

Morgan – Alright...

Alex – We're reassured then.

Morgan – We weren't really worried, but still... And what did he die from, exactly?

Charlie – Oh, you're not aware?

Alex – Since we're asking...

Morgan – And since you claim to have been very close to him...

Charlie – Stanley was crushed by a moving truck.

Alex – That's the risk when you move around a lot.

Morgan – And you say he didn't suffer?

Charlie – It was a big truck. He died on impact.

Alex – And of course, I imagine the body is in very bad condition. Not to mention the liver...

Morgan – That's probably why the lady opted for cremation. There was too much work to gather the pieces and give him a human appearance again.

Fred returns, smiling.

Fred – It's unbelievable!

Morgan – Mrs Chris told us that Stanley was run over by a fifteen-ton truck.

Fred – Oh shit...

Alex – But apparently, he didn't suffer.

Fred – That's good...

Morgan – And what's making you so amused? Do you have more good news to share with us?

Fred – Well, considering the state of my finances, you could say that. My assistant informed me that a theatre producer tried to reach me. He wants to stage the last play Stanley wrote...

Alex – I didn't know he had written a play recently...

Fred – Neither did I... He hasn't written anything in years despite all the advances he asked for...

Chris returns.

Chris – Good afternoon, everyone, and once again, I am very sorry for your loss. I didn't have the privilege of personally knowing your dear departed, but based on the testimonials of those who did, I understand he was a rare individual...

Morgan – Yes...

Alex – That wouldn't have been the first word to come to my mind to describe him, but you could say he was a rare individual indeed.

Morgan – It's true that lately, he was becoming more and more rare... Personally, I've been trying to get hold of him for months.

Charlie – Anyway, today, Stanley didn't miss his last appointment with you.

Fred – Well... So, can we start then?

Chris – Actually, that's what I wanted to talk to you about...

Alex – I fear the worst...

Charlie – Concerning Stanley, the worst has already happened, hasn't it? He's dead...

Morgan – Believe me, with Stanley, we're never sure we've hit rock bottom...

Charlie – So, what's happening, Miss?

Chris – I prefer not to go into technical details that would be entirely inappropriate given the circumstances, but we have a little problem that might cause a slight delay regarding this emotional farewell ceremony.

Alex – A slight delay?

Morgan – If it's only about the ceremony, we could simplify things a bit, right?

Alex – Yes, exactly.

Fred – I have a high-speed train to catch... I didn't plan...

Chris – Unfortunately, it's not just about the ceremony. That's why I delicately mentioned the unexpected occurrence of a small but very annoying technical problem.

Charlie – Go ahead, with the support of faith, we're ready to hear anything...

Morgan – Yes, at this point, we're ready for anything.

Chris – The door is jammed.

Fred – The door?

Alex – Which door?

Chris – The door of our cremation device...

Morgan – You mean the oven door?

Fred – Oh fuck, this is a nightmare...

Alex – And we can't unlock it?

Chris – We called customer service. The technician shouldn't be long in arriving...

Fred – Customer service? Don't tell me you bought your oven from Curry's because I know them...

Alex – Just break down that door!

Chris – It shouldn't take too long, I assure you...

Morgan – Oh no, that's all I needed... I have a client in three quarters of an hour...

Alex – That's why you came in work attire...

Fred – A three-star crematorium, yeah right...

Chris – It will give you a bit more time to spend with your family... We're doing our best, I promise. I'll get back to you as soon as possible...

Chris exits.

Fred – A technical problem, I can't believe it...

Alex – My brother has always been a tough cookie. Definitely... he will remain tough to cook till the end.

Morgan – Well... Definitely... He's been a pain in the ass until the very end.

Charlie – Come on, please... We need to learn to forgive, as Jesus Christ teaches us... Stanley made a lot of mistakes in his life, that's true... But I assure you, he had changed a lot.

Alex – Being run over by a truck changes a man, that's for sure.

Charlie – I mean... He had changed a lot. That's why his sudden disappearance seems so unfair.

Fred – Well, um...

Charlie – My greatest pride is having brought him back to God...

Alex – Do you mean you pushed him under that truck?

Charlie – No, but I had brought him back to the Christian faith. He was a different man, I can testify. Unfortunately, that man left us shortly after Our Lord set him on the right path...

Fred – Well, it goes to show... It's not always the best ones who go first.

Charlie (*sobbing*) – God called him back to Him.

Morgan – Maybe he owed Him money too.

Alex – Even as a kid, he used to pilfer church collection boxes with a string and chewing gum.

Charlie – If you had known him during the last months of his life... He had given up sodomy. He attended mass every day. He even stopped doing crossword puzzles and started writing again.

Moment of shock. Fred's mobile phone rings again.

Fred – Yes? Yes, it's me... Sorry, I can't hear you well... (*To the others*) Excuse me for another minute... Yes, I'm listening...

He exits.

Morgan – Well, I didn't come here to hear the presumed redemption story of Stanley. I just wanted to make sure that son of a bitch was really dead...

Alex – Are you so eager to be a widow? I hope you're not counting on a widow's pension...

Morgan – I have to get married, I told you. Do you know what you need to do to obtain a death certificate?

Charlie – I can take care of it, if you want. Just leave me your address... But I have to tell you that Stanley had signed the divorce papers you sent him a long time ago. He was ready to send them to you when he had this terrible accident.

Morgan – Oh really? So, what should I do then? Am I a widow or a divorcee?

Charlie – The divorce papers are from before the death, but it's somewhat up to you to choose.

Morgan – Well, I don't know... Widow, divorcee... What would you advise me to do?

Charlie – Divorce will be quicker, even if it's not what the Church prefers...

Alex – Does the Church say anything about divorcing a dead man?

Morgan – Well, if it's faster, then. Because I'm a bit pressed for time...

Alex – Is your honeymoon already planned? Where are you going this time? Mecca?

Morgan – Well, yes, as a matter of fact! Not Mecca, but... And what the fuck do you care? All you care about is his liver!

Charlie – By the way, Alex, I need to talk to you too...

Alex – Oh, really?

Fred returns excitedly.

Fred – This is incredible!

Morgan – What now?

Fred – I just received a call from a theatre producer in Guatemala. He's ready to sign me a big cheque for the exclusive rights to Stanley's latest play!

Alex – Do you think we could make some money out of it...

Fred – Stanley is completely unknown in Great Britain, but apparently, he's a real star in Guatemala.

Morgan – It's true that he had Guatemalan citizenship... before his sham marriage with me...

Fred – Well, it depends on the rights...

Alex – Depends on what?

Fred – On who the rights holder is, exactly.

Morgan – The rights holder?

Fred – The person who inherits his copyright after his death.

Alex – Alright... and who is it?

Fred – It could be his sister. His widow. In some cases, his agent...

Morgan – His widow, you think?

Alex – It was a sham marriage, and you wanted a divorce!

Morgan – Yes, well, I didn't do it. And did you hear? Stanley had a lot of affection for me...

Alex – Unbelievable... The lady told you. He signed the divorce papers, so his rights go to his sister, obviously! He didn't have any other family...

Morgan – How much is the cheque?

Fred – 50,000 dollars... and it seems that's just an advance... Apparently, the producer has quite a long reach in Guatemala...

Morgan – Well, it's only Guatemala... Considering the size of the country, having a long reach... doesn't mean much, does it?

Alex – Guatemala isn't far from Panama, right?

Morgan – He must have made a fortune in the cocaine trade.

Fred – It's true that laundering drug money by investing in the performing arts is quite a bizarre idea, but well... In any case, he's also considering making a film about Stanley's life... in Hollywood...

Alex – In Hollywood?

Moment of shock.

Morgan – I can also act as if I never received the divorce papers... The lady told me I have a choice...

Alex – But that's fraud! First of all, where are those papers?

Charlie – I have them.

Alex – Give them to me.

Charlie – They're in my bag, but I don't know if...

Morgan – No way! If someone should have those papers, it's me. And I'll do whatever I want with them!

Alex – Bitch!

Morgan – I really liked Stanley...

Alex – Necrophile!

They are about to come to blows.

Fred – Please, ladies... Show some dignity...

Morgan – Vampire! All you want is his liver!

Charlie – And don't worry, Alex, you're going to get it.

Alex freezes.

Alex – Sorry?

Charlie – Stanley had informed me of his plan to leave you his organs in the event of his death. And he had given me a signed document for the hospital, just in case...

Morgan – Oh, really?

Charlie – Right after the accident, the doctors removed his liver. Miraculously, it was one of the few organs that remained intact...

Alex – No way? God exists!

Morgan – Well, you see... Stanley is also leaving something for you...

Fred – And you know what they say? As long as we have our health...

Alex – But where is this liver?

Charlie – It's on the back seat of my car. In a cooler. Since I wasn't sure if I would see you again...

Chris returns with a big smile, holding a sort of urn.

Fred – So, it's done, finally?

Alex – Did you manage to unlock the door?

Fred – And you spared us the cooking time, trying to stick to your schedule.

Charlie – You did the right thing. I'm not sure if I could have handled that spectacle...

Chris – Oh no, sorry, I apologise.. These are not the ashes of your dear departed...

Alex – Then what are we supposed to do with it? If it's someone else's ashes?

Chris – Actually, it's not a funeral urn, but a collection box.

Fred – A collection box?

Charlie – Mr. Ramirez requested a collection to be made for needy theatre authors...

Alex – Needy theatre authors? I thought they all were, weren't they?

Chris – You can drop your donations into this box, and it will be given to the Assisted Playwrights Association...

Morgan – Well, you see...

Fred – I'm not sure if I have any change...

Chris – Don't worry, we can provide change if you'd like. We also accept credit cards. Your donation will automatically be converted into cash for the association.

Fred – That's fine, thanks.

They reluctantly slip a note or some coins into the collection box.

Chris – Thank you on their behalf... Oh, I do have some good news to share with you...

Alex – Good news? It's strange how such a mundane expression can sound peculiar in a crematorium...

Chris – The service technician just left. The ceremony is about to begin...

Fred – Why not right away?

Chris – Just enough time to tidy things up. Actually, there was a little incident during the previous cremation. Our last client exploded in the furnace...

Fred – A suicide bombing? In a crematorium?

Chris – We do ask people to inform us when their dear departed has a pacemaker... But occasionally, overwhelmed by emotions, they forget to tell us... Lithium batteries, at a certain temperature, don't forgive...

Fred – Well, then we'll wait...

Chris – Sorry to ask you this, but did Stanley have a pacemaker?

Alex – I have no idea, I was interested in his liver...

Chris – Don't worry, we'll check.

Chris is about to leave.

Alex – Excuse me, is there any coffee here?

Chris – A Nespresso machine is available over there.

Alex – Thank you...

Chris – It works with two pounds coins...

Alex – That would have surprised me...

Chris exits.

Fred – Two pounds... That's not cheap...

Alex – Do you have any change?

Charlie – I put everything in the collection box...

Alex – Well then, I'll stick to vodka.

Alex takes out her bottle and takes a sip.

Morgan (to Fred) – With all the alcohol she consumes, if we don't want to risk another explosion, it's probably best if she doesn't get too close to the furnace, right?

Fred – Well, let's get back to business. So, who is the copyright holder of Stanley's work? I have a contract to sign, you know. We'll have to make a decision soon...

Morgan – So, you're in a hurry too...

Fred – Stanley left me high and dry! This deal in Guatemala could save me from ruin!

Charlie – Let me assure you, Stanley also made arrangements for the management of his works after his death.

Fred – Arrangements? He really changed a lot... Indeed.

Charlie – Mr. Ramirez entrusted the management of his rights to a foundation: the Stanley Ramirez Foundation.

Alex – No kidding?

Charlie – Stanley honoured me by appointing me as the President of the foundation that bears his name. This noble institution will perpetuate his memory and contribute to the promotion of his works after his death...

Fred – In plain terms?

Charlie – Half of his rights will go to his rightful heirs, and the other half to his foundation.

Fred – For the sake of everyone, we should reach an agreement quickly.

Alex – Okay, I agree to share with the merry widow... And now, can I get my liver back?

Charlie – Of course, I'll get it right away...

Charlie exits.

Fred – It's strange, I feel like I've seen the black widow somewhere before. Haven't you?

Morgan – Yes... Maybe something in her voice.

A pause.

Alex – I wonder how they'll check...

Morgan – Check what?

Alex – About the pacemaker...

Morgan – Nowadays, they must have the equipment. They're going to do an ultrasound on him...

Fred – I thought ultrasounds were for pregnant women.

Morgan – It must work on corpses too.

Alex – Well, this is all quite complicated. I hope they manage to make their furnace work. We're not going to be here all night either.

Morgan – Otherwise, we'll do it ourselves. I always have a can of gasoline in my trunk just in case.

Fred – It's true, in India, it's much simpler. I saw a documentary about it on TV. They do it as a family on Sundays by the Ganges, like a barbecue. A few bundles of wood, and off you go.

Morgan – Yes... Just like for Joan of Arc.

Alex – It reduces the risk of breakdown, that's for sure. Unless the matches are wet.

Fred – Well, Joan of Arc was alive, though.

Morgan – Mmm... You didn't believe me, and now you'll have me cooked...

A pause.

Morgan – Do you know exactly how cremation works?

Alex – What do you mean, how it works?

Morgan – Well, yes... It's true that it remains a bit mysterious. It's not like in India, precisely. We don't witness the operation... They take the coffin away, and they bring back a pile of ashes that you don't even see in a pot. Technically, I mean...

Fred – Hey, I'll look it up on Wikipedia... We don't have anything else to do anyway... So, cremation...

He types on his phone.

Fred (*reading*) – In practice, cremation takes place in a furnace at a temperature of 850 degrees...

Alex – Oh, that's quite hot...

Morgan – And for how long?

Fred (*reading*) – The duration of a cremation is about 90 minutes for an average-sized person. Oh no, damn it, an hour and a half!

Morgan – For an average person... Do you think we can say that Stanley was an average person?

Alex – They're talking about body size, I suppose. It's based on weight, like for leg of lamb.

Fred – Stanley was more on the skinny side, right?

Morgan – Yes... Almost effeminate, I'd say...

Alex – It's true that even as a child, he loved dressing up as a girl...

Fred – Let's say about fifty kilos, soaking wet... With a bit of luck, it'll be done in half an hour...

Morgan – Half an hour... Let's not get carried away, though...

A pause.

Morgan – So, what remains then? After all this...

Fred – After death, you mean? Well, nothing... There's nothing left...

Alex – Don't tell me you believe in the resurrection of the body too?

Morgan – After cremation!

Fred (*looking at his phone screen again*) – So... The wood of the coffin, the clothes, the flesh, everything is transformed into gas or dust and carried away with the smoke.

Morgan – So, there's nothing left either. So what do they give us in the urn? It's a scam, actually. There's nothing but air...

Alex – When it comes to urns... It's always a bit of air and smells like a scam, doesn't it?

Fred (*reading*) – For adults, what is found in the cremation apparatus consists of the calcined remains of the bones.

Morgan – For adults?

Fred (*reading*) – During the cremation of a baby, as calcification is not yet complete, there are no residues...

A pause.

Morgan – If I understand correctly, cremation is not recommended for infants under one year old...

Alex – I wonder how we managed when Wikipedia didn't exist yet...

Charlie returns carrying a cooler.

Charlie – Here's your liver.

Alex – Thank you... Trust me, I'll take care of it as if it were the Holy Sacrament...

Charlie – It's the most beautiful present a brother can give to his sister, isn't it?

Alex – Well, it's the only present he's ever given me in his life...

She hesitates before giving him the cooler.

Charlie – But your brother wanted this act of generosity to be reciprocated as well...

Alex – That would have surprised me...

Charlie – He asks you to make a symbolic donation to a liver transplant association...

Alex – Is it mandatory?

Charlie – Those are the final wishes of Mr. Ramirez...

Alex – How much?

Charlie – Let's say 5000...

Alex – I don't think we have the same understanding of "symbolic"...

Morgan – Oh yes, that's quite expensive... And to think that in butcher's shops, liver is only for cats...

Alex writes a check and hands it to Charlie, who gives him the cooler in exchange.

Charlie – I advise you to keep it refrigerated and don't wait too long before calling the hospital...

Chris returns.

Morgan – So?

Chris – This time, we can go. But I have one last question to ask you...

Alex – Yeah?

Chris – Who is planning to take care of the little bill?

Morgan – What bill?

Chris – There are expenses, as you can imagine. I've prepared the invoice. Who's going to pay it?

Fred takes the invoice.

Fred – Are you sure you didn't add an extra zero by mistake?

Alex takes the invoice from his hands and also glances at it.

Alex – What? Oh no, no way!

Morgan – He has already cost us enough, hasn't he?

Chris – Oh, I'm really sorry, but in that case, we won't be able to proceed with...

Morgan – But that's blackmail!

Charlie – We can just split it...

Alex – At this point...

Morgan – Alright, let's do it... If not, we'll never get through this...

Fred – That's good because I have a high-speed train to catch...

Charlie – Divided into three, it would be...

Morgan – Into three?

Charlie – I wasn't officially his wife... I don't really belong to the family...

Fred – And what about me?

Charlie – He considered you his best friend... He told me that so many times... It's a great honour, but it comes with certain obligations...

Alex – Come on, let's Chris get it over with once and for all.

Charlie – After everything he did for you, I think you owe him that much...

Morgan – One more word and I'll strangle you...

They each take out their check books

Chris – Alright, I'll collect the checks...

Chris takes the checks and exits.

Charlie – I've prepared a short speech in tribute to Stanley... I wanted to share it with you...

Morgan – Oh no, not the speech...

Charlie – Are you sure you don't want me to read the beginning?

Alex – We prefer to be surprised...

Fred – Alright, and how much for the rights to Stanley's latest comedy?

Charlie – If you write a check for 10,000 pounds, made payable to the Stanley Ramirez Foundation, you can have the script of the play and its exclusive rights.

Fred – Do I have a choice?

He takes out his check book

Charlie – I'll fill in the payee. We have a stamp...

She reaches for the check, but he pulls it away from her hand.

Fred – And the script?

Charlie – Here it is.

She takes a manuscript out of her bag and hands it to him. He gives her the check.

Fred – Thank you... (*Reading the title*) "In lieu of flowers..."

Charlie – That's the title he chose...

Alex – It was prophetic...

Fred – And are you sure it's a comedy?

Charlie – It's very funny, you'll see...

Fred – Coming from you, I'm not sure if that should reassure me.

Chris returns.

Chris – There we go, we can proceed now... Does anyone want to say a few words of farewell? Not too long, if you don't mind, because we're already running behind schedule...

Charlie turns to the other three.

Charlie – No? Then I'll go ahead... (*She takes a paper out of her pocket and unfolds it before starting to read.*) Stanley Ramirez was born in a small village in the outskirts of Guatemala City in nineteen hundred...

Fred – Excuse me, but if we could skip the biography... I have a high-speed train to catch, and as our hostess pointed out, we're already running late...

Alex – It's true that I would have been curious to know under what circumstances my twin brother could have been born in Guatemala while I was born in Switzerland, but I'm in a bit of a hurry too. I have a liver in a cooler, and the ice is starting to melt...

Charlie puts away her paper.

Charlie – You're right, sometimes it's better to let your heart speak...

Alex – I don't know what my heart would say, but my liver has already said thank you...

Charlie clears her throat.

Charlie – So, I'll keep it short... No, Stanley didn't live an exemplary life. But who among us can claim to have always lived according to the precepts of our Lord?

Morgan – Let the one who has never sinned cast the first stone... Well, we should probably shorten it...

Charlie – In any case, before dying, Stanley could have said, like all of us, if that truck had given him the time: I did my best...

Fred – Mmm-hmm...

Morgan – Well, that's a epitaph that doesn't cost anything.

Alex – And it has the merit of conciseness.

Chris – And now, the moment has come... Farewell, Stanley...

Emotional moment. Chris opens a curtain on the garden side or the courtyard side (if we want to keep the scene offstage) or even at the back of the stage (if we want to project a video).

Chris – The moment to bid goodbye to your loved one and wish him a safe journey on his final voyage.

She presses a remote control, and a mechanical sound is heard. A moment of solemnity.

Fred – I didn't know it was done like this...

Alex – Yes, it's quite impressive, indeed...

Morgan – So, we're watching it through a window? Like on TV...

Alex – You can't see much, actually...

Morgan – You can still see a flame.

Fred – Must be the fires of hell...

Alex – What were you expecting to see? A light at the end of a tunnel?

A little buzzer sounds, like the one on an oven timer.

Morgan – I think this time, for Stanley, it's all over.

Fred – It's the same sound as my microwave.

Chris closes the curtain.

Chris – There... Stanley Ramirez has been called to heaven... But he died surrounded by the love of his family...

Alex – He was crushed by a truck. And I don't recall anyone from the family witnessing the scene...

Chris – I meant that the love of his family accompanied him in his last moments...

Charlie – May his ashes rest in peace...

Chris – By the way, I confirm that you will be able to pick his ashes up in a moment.

Chris exits.

Charlie – Forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us...

All (*in unison*) – Amen...

Charlie (*crossing herself*) – Stanley has redeemed most of his faults through his death. Morgan is finally free to start a new life... Alex has a brand-new liver... Fred signs a big contract...

Morgan – Yes, in the end, his death has only brought happiness...

Alex – I hope at least you'll send us a wedding invitation.

Morgan – You can always give us your used liver as a gift.

Fred – In any case, I will send you an invitation to the premiere of his play.

Alex – In Guatemala... You don't take many risks.

A moment of hesitation.

Fred – Well... deep down, he had some likeable qualities too.

Alex – That's true, he was an endearing person despite all his flaws.

Charlie – Otherwise, we wouldn't all be gathered here to pay tribute to his memory.

A moment of respectful silence.

Morgan – Well, now that it's done, I should probably go. I don't want to get a parking ticket.

Fred (*looking at his phone screen*) – Me too, my high-speed train is announced to depart with a fifteen-minute delay. I still have time to jump on...

Charlie – Aren't we waiting for his ashes to be brought back to us?

Alex – Oh, damn, the ashes, that's right.

Charlie – It shouldn't take long, don't worry.

Alex takes another gulp from her vodka bottle, to the surprised looks of the others.

Alex – Now that I know I'm getting a new liver, I have no reason to spare this one.

Chris returns with the urn.

Fred – Ah, the verdict of the urns...

Morgan – We can proceed with the vote count.

Alex – Wikipedia said an hour and a half... Well, at least it's quick...

Fred (*aside*) – They must have an ultra-modern, fast-cooking oven. The girl told me it's a three-star crematorium...

Alex – Did she tell you that?

Chris – To whom should I entrust the ashes of the deceased?

Alex – I'm not really a big fan... And besides, I don't have a garden...

Fred – I was only his agent...

Chris – Perhaps the widow? Unless you want to share... Like with the little note...

Alex – Fine, I'll take them.

Chris exits.

Charlie – In that case, it's time for us to part ways.

Fred – Yes, it's not that I'm bored, but...

Charlie – But before we say goodbye, I have one last thing to give you...

Morgan – Give us? Are you sure?

Charlie – Stanley had prepared a little note for each of you.

Alex – I thought he died instantly?

Charlie – Yes... but he must have had a bad feeling...

Fred – It could have been a disguised suicide. To spare his loved ones...

Charlie – Who knows... The ways of the Lord are inscrutable...

Charlie hands each of them an envelope.

Alex (*reading*) – To my beloved sister.

Morgan – To my faithful wife.

Fred – To my devoted agent. It might be a check...

They open the envelope.

Alex – It's a scratch card...

Fred – Same here...

Morgan – Same. There's a little note with it...

Alex (*reading*) – Good luck...

Charlie – It's not much, but I believe it's all he could offer you.

Morgan – What a delicate gesture...

Alex – Yes... At least, meeting God didn't make him lose his sense of humour..

Charlie – I'll leave you now... And once again... Thank you for coming today... Wherever he is now, I'm sure it means a lot to him... Farewell, then...

Charlie departs after hugging everyone with emotion. The three others prepare to leave as well. Alex approaches the urn to take it.

Alex – Look, there seems to be something engraved on it.

Morgan – It might be a deposit...

Alex gets closer and reads.

Alex – Forgive me.

Morgan – Forgive me?

Fred – He's asking us to forgive him...

Morgan – Can you believe it? He's in there, and he's asking for forgiveness...

Alex – It does make you feel something...

Fred – Yes... I feel like a genie is going to come out of this chamber pot and ask us to make three wishes...

Emotional moment.

Alex – He was my brother after all... Well, I think so... I almost feel remorse for being so tough on him.

Fred – Yes, me too...

Morgan – We can stay a little longer to pay our respects...

Fred – I'll take the next high-speed train then.

Morgan – And I'll get a parking ticket.

Alex – My old liver can hold up for a few more hours.

Fred – After all... maybe he really had changed...

They take a moment to pay their respects to the urn.

Fred – Sorry... It's strange, though...

A pause.

Alex – Yes... It seems too good to be true, doesn't it?

Morgan – That's exactly what I was thinking...

Fred – It's true... Sorry for what?

Alex – For everything he owes us? And everything he's done to us?

Fred – But he didn't know he was going to die. And it can't be him who engraved that on it.

Morgan – Then again...

Alex – What if this was his final scam?

Fred – Stanley wouldn't really be dead?

Morgan – Still, a crematorium wouldn't lend itself to such a joke...

A pause.

Alex – But are we really in a crematorium?

Morgan – No?

Fred – At the Edinburg Festival, they turn a garage into an avant-garde theatre with a few planks and a sign above the door...

Morgan – But that's not possible! And what about my death certificate?

Fred – If he's no longer dead, you're no longer a widow, that's clear...

Alex – And my liver?

Morgan – It could just as well be a calf liver. You should show it to a veterinarian... or a butcher.

Fred – What about the play I've just bought the rights to?

Alex – You didn't even look at it. It might as well be the text of *Hamlet*.

Fred – To be or not to be Stanley, that is the question...

Morgan – But we still have the ashes, right?

Alex – We didn't even look inside the pot. It could as well be cat litter.

Morgan – You still feed the liver to the cat...

Fred – I'll check the address on the internet...

Fred looks at his phone.

Fred – It's the address of a storage facility...

A moment of shock.

Fred – Well, hats off to the artist...

Morgan – Setting up a scam around his own death. It's true, you had to think of it...

Alex – Well, if you think about it... The idea of death has given rise to all religions and all kinds of intellectual smoke and mirrors...

Fred – Not to mention the exorbitant cost of funerals, we know all about that.

Morgan – That's true... You could say death is the biggest scam of all time.

Fred – In the end, Stanley just rode the wave.

Morgan – Oh, Stanley... Now I understand why the obituary specified 'no flowers'...

Alex – He preferred that we didn't waste our money at the florist, so he could rinse us later.

They all remain overwhelmed for a moment. Fred looks at the manuscript he bought from Charlie.

Fred – "In lieu of flowers ..." In the end, it will be his best play...

They each take their rose again and, taking turns in front of the supposed urn containing Stanley's ashes, they slide their rose inside.

Fred – Shall I buy you a drink?

Morgan – I remind you that I'm still a married woman, after all.

Alex – I'm not sure my liver can handle another drink. And unfortunately, I don't expect to have a spare one any time soon...

Fred – That's true, I forgot... Even after what Stanley just swindled from me, I'm not even sure I still have enough money to buy you a drink...

Morgan – Ah, we still have one more chance...

The other two look at her with a questioning look. She takes out her scratch card and scratches.

Morgan – Lost...

Alex does the same.

Alex – Lost as well...

Fred scratches his as well.

Fred – It's my lucky day...

Alex – How much?

Fred – Three pounds. Finally, I do have enough to buy you a coffee.

They exit. A moment. Funeral music. Chris returns with a suitcase, which she places on the ground. She prepares another line of coke.

Chris – Phew! That clears the sinuses. Stanley!

Charlie returns.

Charlie – I told you not to call me Stanley anymore. My name is Charlie now...

Chris – In any case, we'd better not hang around here...

Charlie – What time does our plane depart?

Chris – Precisely at 5:35 PM. Is Guatemala beautiful?

Charlie – I don't know, I've never been there.

Chris – I thought you were born there?

Charlie – You also thought my name was Stanley...

Chris – Your name isn't Stanley?

Charlie – It's a long story, I'll explain it to you on the plane.

Chris – I can't wait to hear it...

Charlie – Did you put all the money in the suitcase?

Chris – Yes, yes, it's all there...

Charlie – Then let's do as we planned, we'll meet at Heathrow in the boarding area. It's better if we're not seen together, you understand...

Chris – OK, see you later...

Chris prepares another line of coke and gets ready to take the suitcase. Charlie stops her with a gesture.

Charlie – I'll take care of the suitcase...

Chris – Ah. See you later then...

Chris exits. Charlie grabs their phone.

Charlie – Luton Airport? I'd like to know what time your next flight to Brussels is...

Fade out.

The end

About the author

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

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

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

A Cuckoo's nest

A simple business dinner

An innocent little murder

Casket for two

Cheaters

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but stable

Four stars

Friday the 13th

Heads or Tails

Him and Her

Is there a pilot in the audience?

Is there an author in the audience?

Chris a moment before the end of the world

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

New Year's Eve at the Morgue

One marriage out of two

Preliminaries

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

Surviving Mankind

The Ideal Son-in-Law

The Smell of Money

The Window across the courtyard

The Worst Village in England

Welcome aboard!

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 – June 2023
© La Comédiathèque – ISBN 978-2-37705-943-0
<https://comediatheque.net/>
Play available for free download