La Comédiathèque

THE JOKER

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Translation by the author

A screenwriter struggling with a broken computer and writer's block receives an unexpected visit from a very strange repairman. Everyone deserves a wild card once in a while...

Characters
Alex
The Joker

2 men or 2 women
For a cast of two women, simply change the gender of every character in the play.

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A cluttered office. Alex is asleep at the desk, head resting on the computer keyboard. A mobile phone rings and jolts Alex awake. Alex answers.

Alex *(half asleep)* – Yeah...? Who's this...? *(Waking properly)* No, no, of course, sorry, I... No, I wasn't asleep. Not at all. I was thinking, actually... Yes, I know, it's a bit late to start thinking, but... Eight tomorrow morning, absolutely... As agreed... I know I said the same thing yesterday, but this time I promise... Filming starts next week, I know... And it's difficult to broadcast a Christmas special in February, I quite understand... No, I've almost finished. Just the last scene to do and... I'll work all night if I have to, but you'll have the entire script by tomorrow morning. Perhaps even tonight, if I finish early... Tomorrow morning, then, if you'd rather... Fine... Otherwise I'm fired. Yes, I know. Thanks for reminding me. That's very motivating... Speak soon!

Alex hangs up and sighs miserably.

Alex – What an idiot... *(Alex stands and checks the time.)* I'd better get on with it.

Instead, Alex switches on the television and collapses into an armchair, eating crisps straight from the packet while a popular entertainment show plays.

Alex – I should get rid of that television... If I only work during the adverts, this script will never get finished.

A call sounds on the computer.

Alex – Oh, for God's sake... How am I supposed to get anything done with all these interruptions?

Alex turns off the television and returns to the desk.

Alex – Hi, Fred, sweetheart. How are you?

Fred *(off) – Hello, Alex. Why am I always the one who has to call? What are you doing?*

Alex – I'm stuck at my desk. Working, believe it or not.

Fred *– Are you coming over later? I bought that enormous bed for us, and I'm sleeping in it alone.*

Alex – Listen, tonight might be difficult...

Fred *– Difficult? That's what you always say! It's getting insulting. Is spending the night with me really that difficult?*

Alex – I've got a script to finish, and...

Fred *– Oh yes, the famous script.*

Alex – What's that supposed to mean?

Fred *– You've been telling me about it for months. You could at least come up with a different excuse. You're supposed to have an imagination. It's your job.*

Alex – Yes, and right now I'm completely uninspired. Believe me, I'd rather be in that big bed with you.

Fred *– Finish the damned script, then come over!*

Alex – I'll try. I can't promise.

Fred *– Come on...*

Alex – Right, I'll get straight back to it and call you when I'm finished, all right?

Fred *– Promise?*

Alex – Promise.

Fred *– Then I'll let you work. Love you.*

Alex – Love you too.

Fred *– I miss you.*

Alex – I miss you too.

Fred *– I'll be waiting. Can I count on you?*

Alex – Sure... *(Alex ends the call and sighs again.)* Why does everybody insist on counting on me? You can't count on me! I've never been able to count on myself. I am simply not a person anyone can rely on. When are they going to realise that?

Alex leans over the computer and rests a hand on it.

Alex – This thing's roasting... Perhaps disconnecting the fan wasn't such a brilliant idea. But it sounded like a jet engine taking off. I need peace and quiet to work! Oh... The keyboard's hot too. It's hardly going to melt from overuse. Please don't let me down now. I'm counting on you, all right? If I'm going to stay awake all night, I need something to keep me going.

Alex starts the coffee machine and sits down at the desk again.

Alex – Now, where was I...? *(Reading the screen)* No! Did I really write that before I fell asleep? Three lines! I almost wish I hadn't woken up.

The mobile rings again.

Alex – Hello...? Oh, yes, good evening, sir... Yes, I know... No, I assure you I'll clear that little overdraft very soon... How much did you say? Oh. That much. I can see why you're worried... Of course I'm worried too, but... Look, I'm about to hand in a script, and I'll be depositing a substantial cheque tomorrow morning... Absolutely... Certainly... Thank you... Tomorrow morning, without fail. I promise... Good evening... And thank you to my bank for treating its customers like one big family, especially when one of them is temporarily short of cash. *(Alex puts the phone away.)* Coffee isn't going to be enough.

Alex stands, snorts a small line of cocaine, then goes over to the coffee machine.

Alex – Is it what I've just put up my nose, or does that coffee machine smell burnt? It's the same coffee I always buy...

Alex realises that smoke is coming from the computer.

Alex – Shit! It's not the coffee machine. It's the computer!

In a panic, Alex hesitates, then grabs the coffee pot and pours its contents over the computer to put out the fire.

Alex – Phew! Good thing I reacted so quickly...

Alex moves closer to inspect the computer.

Alex – Perhaps that wasn't such a good idea after all... *(Pressing a few keys)* It's dead. A minute ago, pressing these made letters appear on the screen. Now nothing... *(Standing)* In a way, I'm lucky I hadn't written anything yet. I'd have lost the lot. Every cloud... Of course, I can't afford a new computer, and I haven't got time to buy one anyway. *(Inspecting it again)* Fire and flood. A complete disaster. Perhaps it can still be repaired... *(Alex picks up a directory and leafs through it.)* Computers... Repairs... Emergency service... Here we are! Joker Repairs. Why not? *(Dialling)* Hello? My computer's developed a slight fault. Nothing serious, I hope, but... Immediately? Excellent. Yes, the address is number nine... That's right. Oh, you know the place? Fine, I'll see you shortly. *(Putting the phone away)* This wasn't a good time to give up smoking either... *(Taking the last cigarette from a packet)* My last cigarette... *(Crushing the packet)* A condemned person's last cigarette. Until now I've always scraped through somehow, at the very last minute. But this time... Why do I feel I've finally hit rock bottom? Like a card player who's played every good card and hasn't even got a joker left. Though you don't use jokers in poker, do you? I can't even get that right.

Alex takes a revolver from a drawer and presses the barrel to his temple. A man suddenly appears. Something about his appearance recalls Alex, but older and extravagantly dressed, like a jester. He wears a jester's cap and a T-shirt marked 'JOKER'.

Joker – No! Don't do that!

Alex jumps in fright.

Alex – Are you mad? You nearly gave me a heart attack!

Joker – That's precisely why I'm here. To stop you doing something foolish.

Alex – I've done plenty of foolish things without your help.

Alex points the revolver at the intruder.

Alex – Who are you, anyway? And how did you get in?

Joker – The door was open. I'm here to help. Trust me. I'm your joker.

Alex – My joker?

Joker – Joker Repairs. I'm the computer technician.

Alex – Already?

Joker – It sounded urgent.

Alex – You frightened the life out of me.

Alex lights the cigarette with the revolver, which turns out to be a novelty lighter.

Joker – You frightened me too. Perhaps I overreacted.

Alex – No, it is urgent, I assure you... *(Looking at the lighter and understanding)* Oh! You thought... Come on, nobody kills themselves over a broken computer.

Joker – In my line of work, you'd be surprised what people do.

Alex studies him suspiciously.

Alex – Aren't you a bit old to be a computer expert? I was expecting a young geek who looked like my nephew. You look more like my father.

Joker – I hear that a lot.

Alex – A lot?

Joker – Shall we look at the computer?

Alex – Yes, of course. But I warn you, it isn't a pretty sight. *(Pointing)* That's the one.

The Joker examines the computer.

Joker – Good heavens! What happened to this poor thing? Did it try to set itself on fire?

Alex – Yes, then it tried to drown itself. Is it serious, doctor?

Joker – I won't pretend the prognosis is encouraging.

Alex – But you can do something to save it?

Joker – The vital organs still have power, but I'm afraid this computer is brain-dead. Its memory may be lost for good.

Alex – But all my work's on there!

Joker – What do you do?

Alex – I write idiotic television series.

Joker – How fascinating.

Alex – I think you missed the word 'idiotic'.

Joker – I always look on the bright side.

Alex – What's the bright side of my computer being dead?

Joker – I'm a technician, not a miracle worker.

Alex – I thought computer technicians were modern-day magicians. I'm disappointed. So how do I get my script back?

Joker – The ventilation system failed, causing a fatal rise in temperature. We may be able to recover the hard drive and transplant it into another machine.

Alex – A transplant? I didn't know computers could have surgery.

Joker – A very delicate operation, in any case. This machine was already on its last legs. A family heirloom?

Alex – Sentimental attachment, combined with a lack of money.

Joker – And your script was on this antique?

Alex – Yes. Well, the one I was supposed to write. The truth is, I haven't started. That's the story of my life.

Joker – An autobiographical script?

Alex – No. Never managing to start anything. That's the story of my life.

Joker – I see.

Alex – I have to hand it in tomorrow morning. And the computer isn't the only thing that's broken. So am I.

Joker – Writer's block.

Alex – More like burnout. Just like the computer. Overheating, see? *(Pointing to his head)* It's smoking in there. A full-scale meltdown. The cooling system's gone and the hard drive's about to fuse.

Joker – I can see that.

Alex – I suppose Joker Repairs can't do anything about me.

Joker – Have you thought of changing careers? Still writing, of course, but rather than writing idiotic series... Perhaps you could write for the theatre.

Alex – The theatre? Not before I've delivered this final script.

Joker – I understand. Keeping your word matters. You've made a commitment and you can't let down everyone who's trusted you.

Alex – Exactly. Especially as they've already paid me half my fee for this damned script.

Joker – Then pay them back.

Alex – I've already spent the half they paid me. And the half I haven't been paid yet.

Joker – Ah.

Alex – And I didn't put anything aside for my taxes. There is one solution left...

Joker – Write the script?

Alex – Go to bed and turn on the gas.

Joker – I sense another problem.

Alex – The gas company cut me off because I haven't paid the bill.

Joker – Right.

Alex – Now you see why I was hoping for a miracle. Haven't you brought some magic charm that makes people invisible or protects them from bullets?

Alex's phone rings. Alex answers.

Alex – Hi, darling... No, I can't get online any more. My computer's just tried to kill itself. I know it was on its last legs. It probably preferred to go with dignity while it still had the choice... I never knew computers had such complicated emotional lives, but I think it was seriously depressed. A complete nervous breakdown. And I'm not far behind... Listen, tonight's going to be difficult. The repair technician is here, and... It may not be fixable. I'm sorry, honestly, but unless there's a miracle... Yes, I know I'm unreliable. My mother always said so too. I'm doing my best. I'll call you back, all right? *(Putting away the phone)* So it's hopeless?

Joker – Buying a new one would certainly be easier.

Alex – With what? I've exhausted my bank's generosity. Even the gas company refuses to supply what I need to go with dignity. I could die with one hand resting on the keyboard of my most faithful companion, my old computer. We could go together. Beautiful, isn't it? Never having to suffer the pain of separation after all these years.

Joker – Come on. There's always a light at the end of the tunnel.

Alex – You mean after you're dead?

Joker – You're not much of an optimist, are you?

Alex – Give me one reason why I should be optimistic right now!

Joker – You said it yourself: nobody kills themselves over a minor computer problem.

Alex – Come to think of it, perhaps the computer being beyond repair is good news.

Joker – Really?

Alex – At least I've got a legitimate excuse for not handing in the script tomorrow.

Joker – Looked at that way...

Alex – I'll say the computer caught fire just as I typed the final line.

Joker – Do you think they'll believe you?

Alex – It's true, isn't it? Apart from not having written a single line. But I could have written an entire script, and the outcome would have been exactly the same. What difference does it make?

Joker – None at all. Though, as you know, even the truth can sound unbelievable.

Alex – Unless you write me a certificate!

Joker – A certificate?

Alex – Like a medical certificate, only for a computer. A death certificate, in this case. I'll tell them the whole script was on it and I've lost everything. You know those people who get interviewed outside their ruined homes after a fire or a flood? Some of them even claim insurance for things they never owned in the first place.

Joker – Wouldn't writing the script be easier?

Alex – Frankly, under the circumstances, even if I wanted to, I couldn't.

Joker – I'm beginning to think you're rather indecisive. And a procrastinator.

Alex – Are you a computer technician or a psychologist?

Joker – Repair work requires a little psychology.

Alex – Procrastinator... You sound just like my father. In fact, the resemblance is uncanny. Have I mentioned that?

Joker – Yes.

Alex – I won't see my parents this Christmas, for once. They used to run a toy shop, so they could never take a holiday over Christmas. They retired six months ago, though, and decided to celebrate with a trip.

Joker – The honeymoon they couldn't afford when they married forty years ago.

Alex – How did you know that?

Joker – Just a guess. Forty years ago, people didn't go off on elaborate honeymoons. A meal out, perhaps, or a weekend somewhere nearby...

Alex – Are you married?

Joker – Not yet.

Alex *(studying him)* – Well, I hope I don't look like my father when I'm your age.

Joker – As the years pass, we all look more and more like our parents and less and less like ourselves. One day you'll look in the mirror and barely recognise the face staring back.

Alex picks up a mirror and examines the reflection.

Alex – You're right. Some mornings, when I look in the mirror to shave, I can hardly put a name to that face.

Alex suddenly notices that the repairman, standing just behind, has no reflection.

Alex – That's odd.

Joker *(uneasy)* – What is?

Alex moves the mirror, trying to catch the repairman's reflection. The Joker tries to avoid it.

Alex – Come over here. I can't see you in the mirror!

Joker – Some optical illusion, I expect. And that mirror could do with a good clean.

Alex – It's incredible! Stand there, I said!

Joker – Are you sure you're ready for this?

The Joker finally allows Alex to hold up the mirror.

Alex – You have no reflection!

Joker – No. Not yet.

Alex – Not yet?

Joker – For now, you're the only one who can see me. You might even say you can foresee me.

Alex – Foresee you? What does that mean? Who are you?

Joker – I am... You're going to find this hard to believe.

Alex – You're my father's ghost! I knew there was a family resemblance. Dad? Is that you?

Joker – It's a little more complicated.

Alex – Isn't it complicated enough? What, then? An imaginary friend? A guardian angel?

Joker – If anything, you're my father. In a sense, every child is responsible for the adult they'll become, just as a parent is responsible for a child's future.

Alex – Can we stop speaking in riddles?

Joker – I'm you. Older.

Alex – Me?

Joker – The person you'll become if you don't do something irreversible. As you can imagine, I have a personal interest in stopping you.

Dumbfounded, Alex mechanically takes a packet of cigarettes from a drawer and prepares to light one.

Alex *(dazed)* – Have you got a light? I desperately need a cigarette.

Joker *(coughing)* – And if you could stop smoking, I'd be grateful. I don't want throat cancer! Do you ever look at the warnings on cigarette packets?

Alex – I should probably stop taking cocaine as well... I'm hallucinating, aren't I? A bad trip... And you're... I've got it! You're a doctor here to treat me!

Joker – I'm here to help. That's what matters.

Alex – But are you a doctor or not? Who sent you? The emergency service or Ghostbusters?

Joker – In a way, you called me. You wished you had a joker. Well, here I am.

Alex – Wait. When I said that, I was hoping for a genie in a bottle. Even a whisky bottle. Or a masked hero, something like that.

Joker – You watch too much television. At your age, you should know superheroes don't exist.

Alex – Me, but older... How is that supposed to help? You're hardly Superman. So this is what I'll look like in thirty years?

Joker – If you took some exercise, perhaps I'd be fitter. And don't get me started on my cholesterol. Try eating something besides crisps and chocolate spread. Have you ever heard of fruit and vegetables?

Alex – A computer repairman? Is that what I become? And you expect me not to eat myself to death?

Joker – I don't necessarily end up repairing computers.

Alex – Pity. With my computer in this condition, that would have been useful.

Joker – What I become depends on you. Everything about my future depends on what you do.

Alex – Right. Could you advance me a little money from my future pension, then? I could pay the gas bill.

Joker – Your pension... If only you knew.

Alex – What? I don't even get a pension? I thought you were here to help. Is this how you cheer me up?

Joker – Don't worry. Like a messenger bearing good news, that's why I've come.

Alex – Good news? Now that sounds dangerous. What is it?

Joker – I sent one of your plays to a producer, and they're interested. A new life is opening up for you! No more idiotic television series. You're finally going to be a proper writer!

Alex – A play? Which play?

Joker – The one you wrote a few years ago but never dared show anyone. Remember?

Alex – My play? That's on the computer too! The one you can't repair, remember?

Joker – Luckily, you made a backup on a floppy disk.

Alex – A floppy disk? Why not a gramophone record? Where would you find a disk drive? Especially if you've come from thirty years in the future!

Joker – You also printed a copy, on recycled paper. I found it in a drawer of your desk. This desk, in fact.

The Joker opens a drawer and takes out a bound manuscript.

Alex – The Lovers at the Grand Hotel... Someone's interested in that?

Joker – A prestigious theatre wants to put it on. With two very fashionable young stars.

Alex – Two young film stars... Let me guess.

Joker – Actually, they're best known as finalists on a reality television show.

Alex – Young stars? The play's about an elderly couple who decide to die together in a luxury hotel rather than let one outlive the other!

Joker – They haven't finalised the casting. And these days, with makeup and special effects, almost anything is possible.

Alex – You're not winding me up, are you?

Joker – Cross my heart.

Alex – Incredible... And you're sure...?

Joker – They're thrilled.

Alex – Enough to offer me an advance straight away?

Joker – Their only worry is that another theatre might make you a better offer.

Alex – Really? I always knew that play deserved better than a drawer. I just thought audiences weren't ready for it.

Joker – Well, times change. You've got a whole new career ahead of you.

Alex – A playwright... Why not? Perhaps I'll finally get a Wikipedia page of my own.

Alex's mobile rings. Alex answers.

Alex – Hello? No. No, I haven't written that bloody script. I haven't even started, and I'm not going to. I've decided I'm worth more than that! You're not firing me. I'm resigning! That's right. Go to hell... And merry Christmas!

Alex hangs up.

Alex – That was my producer. God, that felt good! I've wanted to say that for years.

Joker – Really.

Alex – I'll repay the money they advanced me out of the advance for my play.

Joker – Of course.

Alex – I'm not some hired gun, damn it. I'm a writer! An artist!

Joker – Bravo. But...

Alex – You said I was a hopeless pessimist who never made decisions. Well, I've just taken control of my life!

Joker – Yes, certainly.

Alex – I am the master of my fate! The captain of my soul! Damn it! Am I right?

Joker – Yes, of course.

Alex's phone rings again.

Alex – Hello? No! No, Fred, I'm not coming over tonight. Or tomorrow. Or the night after. I've thought about it, and I don't believe we're meant to be together. You said I never made a decision? Well, here's one: I'm leaving you! I've got important work to write. My talent is finally going to be recognised. No offence, but I'm not made for a bed bought in a furniture warehouse. I'm made of the stuff of dreams. The ceiling above my bed should be full of stars, not cobwebs! Yes, that's right. You too. Good night!

Alex puts the phone away.

Alex – There! No boss, no girlfriend telling me what to do! Am I right?

Joker – Yes, of course. You're certainly heading in a new direction. But there's something I should explain.

Alex – What?

Joker – What I said earlier. The good news.

Alex – Yes?

Joker – It isn't entirely true. Not yet.

Alex – Not yet? What isn't true?

Joker – Well, you haven't actually sent that play to a producer yet.

Alex – What? I thought you said you'd sent it!

Joker – I did. When I was a few years older than you. But you're not me yet.

Alex – You're insane!

Joker – And, to be honest, they rejected the play as it stood. It's rather depressing. You need to rewrite it as more of a comedy.

Alex – A comedy? Two old people deciding to kill themselves in a hotel room so that the one with cancer won't leave the other alone by dying first?

Joker – Even thirty years from now there'll be hard times. People go to the theatre to laugh!

Alex – Laugh? I'll strangle you!

Alex grabs the Joker by the throat and starts to squeeze. The Joker breaks free and escapes around the other side of the desk.

Joker – Come on, now. Look on the bright side!

Alex – Why? Why tell me a pack of lies?

Joker – To get a reaction! To shake you out of your misery!

Alex – Well, congratulations. You've succeeded. Do I look shaken enough?

Joker – I could see you were going through a bad patch. You need to believe in yourself, old friend!

Alex – Could you stop calling me 'old'?

Joker – I'm going to help you get your confidence back!

Alex – Is this a joke? Help? Before you turned up, my life was going reasonably well, apart from a few minor details. Now I've lost my job and my girlfriend! Thank you very much!

Joker – Don't forget, I saved you from suicide.

Alex – That wasn't a gun. It was a lighter! Now I really have a reason to kill myself!

Joker – Don't be so negative.

Alex – There must be a way to put things right. I'll call the producer and Fred. I could say I'd been drinking or taking drugs. That I wasn't myself.

Joker – I'm afraid that might not work.

Alex – Thanks for the encouragement. So what do I do?

Joker – All right, let's face facts. Your first play was terrible. But you can write another. A comedy! People love comedies.

Alex – A comedy? You've made me want to throw myself under a train. How do you expect me to write a comedy? This is insane.

Joker – Make an effort! And while we're at it, could you try keeping a partner for more than six months? I don't want to end up all alone! Once you're over fifty, the only new faces you meet are at funerals, and even then they're usually the dead person's grandchildren.

Alex – I'm going to kill him.

Joker – Which would be another form of suicide.

Alex stands there, utterly defeated.

Alex – But if you're from the future, surely you know things we could make money from today.

Joker – Such as?

Alex – Winning lottery numbers, share prices, property values. Didn't you bring tomorrow's newspaper with the numbers for the next big jackpot?

Joker – I'm not from the future in that sense.

Alex – How many senses of 'from the future' are there?

Joker – This isn't time travel. We're not in some science-fiction film.

Alex – You don't say.

Joker – How can I explain? I'm only a possibility. A version of you that changes every moment according to the decisions you make now. You can't expect me to come from one fixed, reliable future.

Alex – I see. So you're unreliable too! I can't count on you!

Joker – You're not going to make a scene, are you? Not you!

Alex – Fine. What do you suggest, then? Since you're here to help.

Joker – There's only one thing for it. You have to write that play!

Alex – Which play?

Joker – The one that prestigious theatre might decide to stage!

Alex – But I'm a failure! You should know! A complete fraud. I can't even write a silly episode of a soap opera. I'll never write a play!

Joker – Don't be so hard on yourself.

Alex – You only say that because you don't want to end up alone in some miserable care home for bankrupt screenwriters. Sorry, but I can't do anything for you, you old wreck!

Joker – That's not very kind. I'm older than you, so show a little respect. Besides, you realise that in a few years, you'll be this old wreck.

Alex – A play, seriously? You want to end up as a playwright? You're joking! If you're lucky enough to have a play performed in a proper theatre, half the seats are empty and the other half are filled by people with complimentary tickets. The writer earns less than the person selling programmes.

Joker – Don't be so materialistic. Don't you want your work to live on after you?

Alex – Oh, now we're talking about immortality! When television news covers a new play, they don't even mention the playwright's name!

Joker – I happen to like theatre.

Alex – Perfect. Write the play yourself, then! Better still, write the script I'm meant to deliver tomorrow morning. At least I won't have to pay back their advance.

Joker – Why not?

Alex – Go on, then.

The Joker sits at the desk.

Joker – I'd be happy to help, but without a computer it's going to be difficult.

Alex opens a drawer and throws a pad and pen onto the desk.

Alex – Do it the old-fashioned way. Pen and paper.

Joker – Of course! After all, Shakespeare wrote Macbeth before anyone invented the Macintosh.

Alex – Brilliant.

Joker – Right, here goes.

The Joker thinks hard and tries to write, while Alex paces the room.

Joker – Could you stop pacing? I can't concentrate!

Alex – See? Not so easy, is it? It's a profession.

Joker – Will you give me five minutes?

Alex – Fine. I'll have a cigarette. Give your future lung cancer a head start.

Alex takes out a cigarette but does not light it. The Joker sighs.

Joker – All right. I can't think of anything either.

Alex – We're in serious trouble! I owe thirty thousand to one bank, and I haven't got a job!

Joker – I thought you owed money to the other bank.

Alex – I do. But before that, I ran up a debt with this one. What can I say? I believe in spreading the risk.

Joker – You'll find a way out.

Alex – If I don't, neither will you! You'll be looking for a soup kitchen, not another bank.

Silence.

Joker – What if we wrote it together? I could be your muse.

Alex – Some muse! More like a nuisance. Besides, I haven't even got a computer. I don't write by hand. This isn't the Middle Ages! You couldn't even fix the machine!

Joker – I'm not really a computer technician.

Alex – Fine. I'll try to fix it myself. How hard can it be? Once my coffee machine broke down and I managed to bring it back to life.

Alex approaches the computer and starts tinkering with it.

Joker – Are you sure you know what you're doing?

Alex – You said it still had power, didn't you?

Joker – It was just an expression.

Alex puts both hands inside the computer, then suddenly convulses as though receiving an electric shock.

Joker – Apparently I was right. It still has power.

Alex collapses, apparently electrocuted.

Joker – Oh God, no!

The Joker rushes over to help.

Joker – If that idiot doesn't recover, I die too!

The Joker slaps Alex's face.

Joker – Wake up!

Alex does not move.

Joker – I've got no choice.

The Joker gives Alex mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Alex suddenly wakes, horrified.

Alex – What the hell are you doing? You creepy old narcissist!

Joker – You could at least thank me. That's the second time I've saved your life.

Alex – Your own life, you mean!

They both recover their composure.

Alex – So what do we do now?

Joker – First, I think you should stop trying to repair things.

Alex – You're right.

Joker – Why don't you enrol on a computer-repair course?

Alex – Brilliant. We've got all the time in the world, haven't we? In six months or a year I could probably take this thing apart and put it back together with my eyes closed.

Joker – Not you. Me!

Alex – Sorry?

Joker – Remember! I'm your older self. What I am depends on what you do. If you enrol on a computer course today, I'll know how to repair that computer right now!

Alex – That makes sense... Do you think it would work?

Joker – Logically, it should.

Alex – But don't forget, even when that computer worked, I had writer's block. I'm self-taught. A fraud! I got my first job because I was sleeping with the producer's secretary, and everything followed from there. I've had no training at all. I could be arrested at any moment for practising dramatic writing without a licence!

Joker – Then enrol on a screenwriting course.

Alex – What?

Joker – Then I become a qualified screenwriter and can write your script for you!

Alex – At this point, what have we got to lose?

Joker – Ideally, find a combined course in computer repair and screenwriting. Then I could fix the machine as well.

Alex – That might be asking a bit much... *(Using the mobile)* International Academy of Screenwriting... Sounds rather dubious, doesn't it?

Joker – We can't be choosy.

Alex dials the number.

Alex – Hello...? Yes, I'd like to enrol on your... Two years? That's quite a long time... Oh, and there's an entrance examination? Yes, I'll hold.

Joker – An entrance examination! That's unfortunate. I hope you pass.

Alex – I thought you believed in me... Hello? Ah. Right. So there's an age limit too... I'm afraid I'm already past my best-before date. Thank you anyway.

Alex puts the phone away.

Joker – I should have come to see you when you were younger. I wonder if it's already too late.

Alex – We have to face it. I'm never going to be a great screenwriter.

Joker – There must be other courses. Perhaps we should aim a little lower.

Alex looks at the phone screen.

Alex – Joker Screenwriting... A three-week course in script doctoring.

Joker – Script doctoring?

Alex – Fixing scripts. Like repairing computers, except you fix writers who've run out of ideas.

Joker – At this point, why not?

Alex dials.

Alex – Hello? I'd like to register for your next script-doctoring course... Right... Fine... How much? I see... My name? Alex Dumas... Fine, I'll send the payment... Thank you. *(Putting down the phone)* There. I'm enrolled.

Joker – But?

Alex – It costs eight thousand.

Joker – I don't think I'll ever finish paying off your debts. I hope it's worth it.

Alex – That's for you to tell us. Got any ideas now?

Joker – It's only a course in fixing other people's scripts.

Alex – Try adapting my play.

Joker – The Lovers at the Grand Hotel?

Alex – You wanted to turn it into a comedy. We could make it an episode of the series. The one I'm meant to deliver tomorrow morning.

Joker – The one about the elderly couple who kill themselves?

Alex – Are you a script doctor or not?

Joker – I hope that course was any good. Let me see it.

Alex hands the Joker the bound manuscript.

Alex – Here.

Joker – What if every one of their suicide attempts goes wrong? That might be funny.

Alex – Hmm... A running gag. But they're still old and suicidal. Hardly the spirit of Christmas.

Joker – Wait, I can feel something coming. I've got a better idea. They take a lethal dose of poison, lie on the bed and switch on the television to pass the time while they wait for it to work. The lottery results come on. The numbers they've played for forty years have finally won. They've won three hundred million.

Alex – And that's funny?

Joker – You're right. Turning this into a comedy won't be easy.

Alex – You know, I'm beginning to think that script-doctoring course was a waste of eight thousand.

A pause.

Joker – Or we accept that it's a tragedy. Make it deeply moving. A play about the loneliness of old age and the right to die with dignity. It could be beautiful.

Alex – Oh dear... Tragedy depresses me.

Joker – Perhaps that's the step you need to take. Accepting that life really is depressing.

Alex – Thank goodness you're here to cheer me up.

The phone rings.

Alex – Hello? Speaking... What? No, that can't be! When did it happen? I see... Thank you for telling me.

Alex puts down the phone.

Joker – What is it?

Alex – You were right. Life is a tragedy. Both my parents have just died in the hotel where they were spending their second honeymoon.

Joker – Dead? How?

Alex – They were found lying on the bed, holding hands, with the television on. There was a lottery ticket on the bedside table.

Joker – Oh... That's quite a jackpot.

A pause.

Joker – I must admit, I'm beginning to have trouble seeing that light at the end of the tunnel myself.

Alex – We need some sort of sign from above.

Joker – Something to give us hope.

A pause.

Alex – Can you smell sulphur? I think it's coming from the kitchen.

Joker – Perhaps that's the sign we've been waiting for.

Alex disappears into the kitchen.

Alex *(off)* – It's a miracle! They've turned the gas back on!

Joker – I think the message couldn't be clearer...

The older man quietly disappears, leaving the jester's cap on the desk. Alex returns to find the room empty and stares in bewilderment.

Blackout. Atmospheric music.

Epilogue

Alex is asleep over the computer, just as at the beginning. The phone rings. Alex answers.

Alex *(half asleep)* – Yeah...? Who's this...? *(Waking properly)* No, no, of course, sorry, I... No, I wasn't asleep. Not at all. I was thinking, actually... Yes, I know, it's a bit late to start thinking, but... Eight tomorrow morning, absolutely... As agreed... I know I said the same thing yesterday, but this time I promise... Filming starts next week, I know... And it's difficult to broadcast a Christmas special in February, I quite understand... No, I've almost finished. Just the last scene to do and... I'll work all night if I have to, but you'll have the entire script by tomorrow morning. Perhaps even tonight, if I finish early... Tomorrow morning, then, if you'd rather... Fine... Otherwise I'm fired. Yes, I know. Thanks for reminding me. That's very motivating... Speak soon!

Alex puts the phone away.

Alex – Why do I feel I've had that conversation before?

The doorbell rings.

Alex – Who could that be?

Alex goes to open the door.

Alex *(off)* – Dad? What are you doing here? I thought you were dead!

Alex returns with the actor who played the Joker, now dressed conventionally and carrying a large wrapped present.

Father – We haven't seen each other for a while, but that's a bit much! I was passing nearby. And since your mother and I won't be here for Christmas this year, I thought I'd bring your present over.

Alex – That's funny. I was just thinking about you. Well, dreaming about you, to be precise.

Father – Dreaming?

Alex – Or having a nightmare. I'm not sure. You were dead, and Mum too, but you came back as a computer technician. Then I discovered that the technician was actually me, thirty years older.

Father – Dreams can be strange things.

Alex – Wow! It's enormous! Can I open it now?

Father – Of course.

Alex unwraps the present.

Alex – A computer!

Father – You said your old one was on its last legs.

Alex – That's for sure. You couldn't have chosen a better moment.

Father – Well, if it helps you out, I'm glad.

Alex – I'm glad to see you, actually. I've been feeling rather low. It's as though I need to make some important decisions if I don't want to turn into a miserable old fool, but I can't make up my mind.

Father – Well, as your mother says, you've always been indecisive and inclined to put things off. Can I give you a piece of advice?

Alex – I know. You've said it a hundred times. Whenever you have an important decision to make, ask yourself whether the old person you'll become one day will be able to say, 'I'm proud of you.'

Father – You might get it wrong, but at least you'll have tried.

Alex – Yes... Right now, though, I feel as if I've been dealt a rotten hand.

Father – Everybody deserves a wild card. But remember one thing...

Alex – You only get to play once.

Father – Right. I'll let you get back to work.

Alex – I'll see you out. So where are you going for this second honeymoon?

Father – We've changed our plans. Instead of a week somewhere sunny, we've decided to spend one night in a luxury hotel. Your mother's idea. She wants a proper wedding night.

Alex – Here in town?

Father – At the Grand Hotel!

Alex – Oh...

Father – To finish in style.

Alex – Finish?

Father – Our working lives! We've just retired, remember? Are you all right?

Alex – Yes, of course... Well, have a lovely stay. Goodbye, Dad. Give Mum my love. *(His father leaves. Alex is visibly shaken.)* Right. I really must get started. *(Alex plugs in the new computer and sits down. The phone rings.)* Hello? Fred! Listen... No, I'm the one who should apologise for what I said earlier when you called... You didn't call? Oh... Then I must have dreamed it. More of a nightmare, really. My computer burst into flames and... It's too complicated to explain, but believe me, it would make a good play. No, Dad stopped by and gave me a new computer. Yes, they're going away on their second honeymoon... I hope it goes well. What would you think if I wrote a play? Really? You think so? Thank you for encouraging me. Yes... Me too. Love you. I'll call you back. *(Alex hangs up and looks at the old computer. Then at the jester's cap. Alex picks it up, thoughtful.)* Well then... See you in thirty years, old friend. I hope you'll be proud of me.

Alex begins typing on the new keyboard, hesitantly at first, then faster and faster.

Blackout.

The End.

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

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

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

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

Comedies for 5 to 6

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

Comedies for 7 or more

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

Collection of sketches

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

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

free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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