La Comédiathèque



Stories to die for

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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Stories to die for

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Translation by the author

Nineteen short comic scenes about death, blending black humour, the absurd and existential questions. Each stands on its own, taking a universal situation in an unexpected direction – often with a final twist that overturns everything that came before.

Cast:

Two or three performers per sketch
with flexible casting according to the roles.

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The Three Knocks...

Two characters open the curtain slightly to observe the audience waiting for the start of the show.

One – Who's that old lady in the front row, the one with the hearing aid?

Two – She's the copyright holder...

One – The copyright holder...?

Two – The playwright's great-grandniece. We had to ask her permission to perform it. And believe me, heirs can be even more of a pain than living playwrights...

One – What's the point of staging plays by dead authors if we still have to pay the heirs...

Two – Only ten more years and the rights will finally expire. Then it's public domain...

One – Let's hope she enjoys the show, at least.

Two – I wouldn't count on it. She was at the original production in 1927. She's bound to have opinions...

One – Then why did she come?

Two – Probably to count the audience and make sure she's not being cheated out of her ten percent. We had no choice but to invite her and butter her up...

One – For now, her eyes are closed. Is she concentrating… or just asleep?

Two – Or maybe dead...

One – Oh no, she's snoring...

Two – Maybe we should wake her up. We're about to give the three knocks...

One – I'll ask them to make those knocks a bit louder...

Blackout. Three loud knocks.

1. Condolences

A man is standing in front of a grave. Another man approaches.

Two – Excuse me, I'm looking for Polnareff's grave...

One – Is he dead?

Two – Excuse me, I'm looking for Polnareff's grave...

One – At the end of the pathway, on the left... You can't miss it... There are cigarette butts all around...

The second man is about to go there, then hesitates and looks at the tomb in front of which the first man is standing.

Two – Cemeteries are strange places when you think about it... Are the dead radioactive, that they bury them in confined spaces for centuries, like nuclear waste? I'm all for cremation, aren't you?

One – Pardon?

Two – Did you know her?

One – She was my mistress...

Two – Oh, I'm sorry.

One – There's really no need... She was a real piece of work.

Two – Come on, don't say that... So, that's why you only came now, after the ceremony. So you won't cross paths with the husband.

One – Yes...

Two – You didn't kill her, did you?

One – No! She was run over by a tram. She'd just left my place to fetch the lighter I'd forgotten in my four-wheel drive. On her way back across the road... The line had opened the day before. She forgot the tram was there...

Two – That's the problem with trams. Since they're electric, you can't hear them coming...

The first man takes out a cigarette and puts it in his mouth.

One – Do you have a light...? I ran out of a lighter...

Two – Of course.

One – We are allowed to smoke here, aren't we?

Two *(giving him a light)* – Cemeteries are the last place where smoking is still allowed. And if it were a non-smoking cemetery, they wouldn't have buried Gainsbourg there...

The first man eagerly lights his cigarette.

One – That's how her husband found out about our affair... She used to tell him that she was visiting her grandmother at the retirement home. Her grandmother never remembers anything, so it was convenient. But then the tram ran her over right in front of my place... Her husband must have suspected something...

Two – Of course... Discovering you're a widower and a cuckold at the same time...

One – Since then, I've been on foot...

Two – Pardon?

One – He had his wife buried with my keys! Probably to get back at me...

Two – Your keys?

One – The keys to my car! I had given them to her... So she could fetch my lighter...

Two – Ah, yes, of course...

One – I went to see her body before the funeral and noticed my keys sticking out of her pocket. But there were too many people around... I couldn't do anything. And now I've no idea how to get them back...

Two – But don't you have a spare key...?

One – Yes... My wife has it...

Two – Just tell her that you lost yours...

One – We're separated... This bitch just told her that I was cheating on her... So there's little chance that my ex-wife will give me the spare keys...

Two – I see...

One – It'll be dark soon... Do you have a shovel?

Two – Are you kidding?

One – You don't have a shovel... Do you have a car?

Two – Shall I give you a lift?

One – I'd appreciate it. Which way are you going?

Two – To Montmartre.

One – Funny, that's where my mistress used to live.

Two – I know... I'm her husband...

One – Oh, I see... I had my doubts when I saw the lighter...

The second man takes the lighter out of his pocket.

Two – Oh, yes, sorry... Here you go, of course... I didn't know it was yours... I was also surprised to find it in her hand when they brought her back to me. Since my wife doesn't smoke... Well, she didn't smoke...

The first man takes the lighter.

One – Thanks. *(Glancing at the lighter)* Not a scratch... That's a miracle...

Two – My wife, on the other hand...

One *(putting away the lighter)* – I value it a lot... She gave it to me as a gift...

Two – But about your keys... I'm really sorry... I swear I didn't know... I didn't think of checking her pockets...

One – I believe you... You seem like a good guy...

They are about to leave.

One – But I thought you were looking for Gainsbourg's grave? That's why I wasn't suspicious ... You were trying to trap me...?

Two – Not at all... During the ceremony, obviously, I didn't have much time to wander around... I thought I'd come back later to do a bit of sightseeing... Never mind, there'll be another time.... *(Pause)* I've always wondered what they do with the dead when cemeteries are full...

One – We forget them. Apart from a few celebrities. Perhaps that’s what immortality is: a burial plot in perpetuity...

They walk away.

One – It's true, it's a beautiful place...

Two – She insisted on being buried here...

One – It must be expensive, right? It's very trendy...

Two – Yes... It was her showbiz side...

They leave.

Two – You were right. She really was a bitch...

One – Come on, don't say that...

2. Dead Line

A character sits at a computer, with another seated opposite.

One *(checking the screen)* – So, according to all the information you provided, that would be... December 27, 2041. In the evening.

Two – Ah...

One – Does that pose a problem for you? If I'm not mistaken, you'll be 76 years and 3 months old... It's a bit young, of course, but... Given your lifestyle and, well, your less-than-healthy living conditions… Believe me... You couldn't hope for much better...

Two – Yes, of course, but... December 27th is right in the midst of the holiday season... That's not really convenient… My wife and I run a chocolate shop. We make half of our annual turnover at that time... *(The other indicates that he can't do anything about it.)* And what if I quit smoking...?

One – Ah, now that changes things... Let's see... *(He types on his computer.)* Non-smoker... You still don't plan on moving...?

Two – It's next to the shop... and with the soaring real estate prices...

One – Alright... That would bring us to... February 29, 2044... It's a leap year... That buys you nearly three years.

Two – Is it really worth it...?

One – Ah, that's up to you to decide.

Two – And what if I also stop drinking aperitifs...?

One – Well, you have to live...

Two – You're right... We can't give up everything... *(Pause)* And my wife...?

One – Oh, that, you know, it doesn't really matter. It might even be good for your heart... and your prostate.

Two – No, I mean, my wife, um... When is she scheduled...?

One – I'm sorry, that information is strictly confidential...

Two – But... Before or after me...?

One – Even if I knew, I wouldn't be able to tell you... Really...

Two – Mmmm... She doesn't smoke...

One – Oh, you know, sometimes that doesn't mean much. And you also have to take passive smoking into account...

Two – She makes me smoke on the balcony...

One – She could have an accident... Does she drive a lot of kilometers per year?

Two – She doesn't drive...

One – Pedestrians can also get run over while crossing the street, you know... And there are also accidents at home... A gas leak... A fall down the stairs...

Two – A hairdryer falling into the bathtub...

One – You seem so keen on your wife going before you. You mean you want to spare her the pain of outliving you?

Two – It's not that... It's for the family vault... Since my mother passed away, there's only one spot left...

One – And...?

Two – Well... I had a terrible relationship with my mother... I don't want to... You understand...? So if my wife goes first, it solves the problem... She takes the last spot, and I can go elsewhere... Without any fuss...

One – I understand...

Two – And what if I start doing a bit of sports...?

One – If it's not a dangerous sport... What were you thinking?

Two – I don't know... Petanque...

One – You can't imagine the number of skull fractures recorded each year among amateur boules players...

Two – Alright... Never mind... Let's go for December 27, 2041...

He gets up to leave, then hesitates and turns back to his interlocutor one last time.

Two – By the way, I forgot to ask you... How am I going to die, exactly...? Lung cancer?

One *(caught off guard)* – Ah, yes, that's true, I'm sorry, I completely forgot to check... You did well to ask me...

He checks on his computer before looking up with an embarrassed expression.

One – I did warn you that your living conditions were unhealthy...

The other person's face shows some confusion.

One – The balcony... A collapse... In the end, I think you'd better quit smoking...

3. False Start

A woman in mourning arrives. She takes out a handkerchief from her bag and wipes a tear. Her phone rings.

Woman 1 *(in a very emotional voice)* – Yes...? Oh, it's you... Yes, yes, I'm at the funeral home, right now. It's true I hadn't seen him in years, but still. It's quite a shock. I wanted to see him one last time...

Stage left, a second woman arrives, also in mourning.

Woman 1 – Excuse me, I have to hang up. My sister just arrived. I'll call you back later, alright? Thanks for calling...

The two women hug, without much warmth.

Woman 2 *(pointing towards stage right)* – Thank goodness you told me. I never got a death notice. Is he in there?

Woman 1 – Yes.

Woman 2 – Have you seen him?

Woman 1 – Yes.

Woman 2 – It's been at least ten years... He must have changed, right?

Woman 1 – He's dead.

Woman 2 – Yes... I'm not really sure I want to face him, actually. I've never encountered a dead body. Maybe it's better to preserve the memory of him from our last meeting when he was full of life...

Woman 1 – Come on. Do it for him. I'm sure he would have been pleased to see you one last time.

Woman 2 – Alright.

She heads towards stage right without enthusiasm and disappears. Her sister wipes another tear. The other woman returns after a moment, looking a bit disturbed.

Woman 1 – Are you okay...?

Woman 2 – You said the door on the right, didn't you?

Woman 1 – Yes, why?

Woman 2 – It's not him.

Woman 1 – You haven't seen him in ten years. He must have changed, inevitably.

Woman 2 – He didn't change sex, though... There's a woman in the casket.

Woman 1 – Are you sure...?

Woman 2 – A woman who looks nothing like him, you know... Didn't you notice?

Woman 1 – I was so upset this morning. I dropped my contact lenses in the sink. It must be the door on the left. There are two funeral rooms... I'll go check.

Woman 2 – I think it's better if I do it...

She leaves again and comes back after a moment.

Woman 1 – So...?

Woman 2 – It's not him either.

Woman 1 – Are you sure?

Woman 2 – Unless he kept it from us his whole life that he was Black… Show me the funeral invitation... Maybe you got the address wrong. There are funeral homes everywhere...

Woman 1 – Oh, my God... It upset me so much to learn that he died. And now, we won't even be able to attend his funeral...

She takes the invitation out of her bag and hands it to her sister.

Woman 2 *(looking at the death notice)* – No, this is the right address... *(Reading)* "It is with great sadness that we announce the death of Mr..." But that's not his name!

Woman 1 – This can't be! Let me see...

She takes the invitation and squints to read it.

Woman 1 – Damn! That's our neighbours' surname. The postman puts their letters through our door at least once a month. Martinez, Ramirez... I didn't notice.

Woman 2 – So, he's not dead...

Woman 1 – I'm terribly sorry... *(An awkward silence.)* What are we going to do with the wreath?

Woman 2 – I doubt the florist will take it back. Can you imagine florists refunding funeral flowers? We might as well leave it for our neighbours' deceased relative.

Woman 1 – Especially since they didn't seem to care much about it. They didn't even show up...

Woman 2 – That's normal, you have the funeral invitation...

Woman 1 – Damn, that's right. How am I going to tell them...

Woman 2 – Oh, yes... You'll need all the tact you can muster...

Woman 1 – Well... The good news is he's not dead... I had almost made peace with it...

Woman 2 – So, that's done, right?

They walk away.

Woman 1 – Well... the good news is, he's not dead. And I'd already nearly finished grieving...

Woman 2 – Are you going to visit him?

Woman 1 – Who?

Woman 2 – Well, him!

Woman 1 – Why would I go see him?

Woman 2 – I don't know. You were so determined to bid him a final farewell. Well, this way you can say goodbye while he's still alive…

4. Interrogation

One character paces back and forth behind the second character, who is seated on a chair.

One – You're going to talk, believe me. I've broken tougher ones than you, believe me.

Two *(with a weary look)* – I'm innocent, I tell you.

One – Yeah, sure. They all say that. Come on, let's start from scratch. Name, first name, age, profession...

Two – Pedro Sanchez, 33 years old, nurse...

One – And where were you on Wednesday night around midnight?

Two – In my bed. I was sleeping.

One – Alone?

Two – No, with my wife.

One – And of course, you're going to tell me she was sleeping too...

Two – Well, yes. At midnight. We both had work the next day.

One – You could at least be a bit more imaginative.

Two – I have nothing to say to you, I tell you.

One – Sure, yeah... Well, believe me, you're going to tell me anyway.

Two – What? That I have nothing to say to you? I just told you.

One – Don't play dumb with me! You're not going to win this.

Two – That's for sure...

He stands up to stretch his legs.

One – Sit down, Sanchez! *(The other chuckles.)* And be careful or I'll charge you with contempt as well.

The other sits back down, resigned.

Two – Can't we even have a little fun...

One – So? Where were you on Tuesday night?

Two – Didn't we say Wednesday?

One – Yeah, whatever, Tuesday, Wednesday, who gives a damn. Where were you?

Two – I don't remember.

One – What do you mean, you don't remember? You just told me you were in bed with your wife.

Two – No, that was on Wednesday, but on Tuesday, I don't remember.

One – Damn it, you're going to talk! *(He hits the table with his hand, then writhes in pain.)* Oh, shoot...

Two – Are you alright...?

One – Mind your own business!

Two – Does it hurt...?

One – A lot...

Two – Let me see.

One – What do you know about it?

Two – I'm a nurse... You made me repeat it at least ten times. *(The first one lets him and the other examines his hand.)* It's fine, nothing's broken.

One – Then why does it hurt like hell?

Two – You didn't have to hit so hard. It's crazy, you even broke the table. You know, you almost scared me. I thought you were really going to slap me.

One – I'm sorry, I got carried away.

Two – What nonsense, these interrogation drills. We didn't sign up to get beaten up in custody, damn it.

One – Yeah, well, next time, you can be the cop. See if it's more fun than being the suspect...

Two – Can we take a little break? No need to be in a hurry.

One – Alright.

He takes out a pack of cigarettes and offers one to the other.

Two – Thanks, I quit last week. *(The other is about to light his cigarette.)* By the way, I don't want to be too nitpicky, but you know it's forbidden now...

One – What?

Two – Well, uh... We're in a public place, right?

One – Oh, damn it... No, but why did I choose this crappy job... So now, a cop can't even offer a cigarette to a suspect during an interrogation?

Two – They could sue you... You watch too much TV, you know...

The other reluctantly puts his pack of cigarettes away.

One – Alright, well, let's get back to it, then.

Two – Okay. Your turn to be the suspect?

One – Okay.

He sits down on the chair, and the other starts pacing behind him for a while. The first one starts getting impatient.

One – Come on, get on with it. I'm starting to fall asleep here...

Two – Wait, damn it! I'm focusing...

He continues pacing, then starts.

Two – So, you asshole, where were you on Wednesday night at midnight? You're going to tell me eventually, so you might as well tell me now and save time.

One – Okay. I was robbing the convenience store down the street.

He laughs.

Two – Oh, come on, stop kidding!

One – You just told me we'd save time. You convinced me, and there you go. You're a damn good cop, buddy. *(Looking at his watch)* And besides, look at the time! We're not doing overtime, no way. Not for the pay we get...

Two – Oh, damn it, you're right, it's time to hit the road. And I can't be late today. My wife decided to drag me to the theatre tonight.

One – No way...?

Two – I hope it's less boring than last time. I almost fell asleep...

They both put on their jackets and get ready to leave.

One – And last Wednesday at midnight, what were you doing? I almost want to know now. Come on, you can tell me...

Two – Well, I was in bed, believe it or not.

One – With your wife?

Two – No, with yours, you idiot.

They leave, laughing.

One – Who knows...

5. The End

The first character stares fixedly towards the audience. The second one enters, seeming to be searching for his way.

Two – Excuse me. Do you know where Jim Morrison's grave is...?

One *(coming out of his meditation)* – No idea.

Two – Last time I came here was for the funeral, but I was so stoned I don't remember a thing. Did you know him?

One – Morrison?

Two – No... The... The guy they're burying, there... There are a lot of people. Was he someone important?

One – A philosopher... who also wrote plays.

Two – He was an enlightened thinker, a generous teacher, a loyal friend... Blah blah... He probably wrote nothing but incomprehensible stuff, messed around with his students, and owed money to everyone... Assholes die too, right? Usually later than everyone else, actually. But they end up croaking anyway. So where do we bury them, huh? Look at the epitaphs around you. To my dear husband... To our beloved father... To our beloved boss... And what about the guys who cheated on their wives, beat their children, and exploited their workers, where do we bury them? I don't know why we feel the need to sanctify idiots once they're dead.

One – Perhaps it's the gratitude of the living for finally being rid of them, I suppose...

Two – In any case, just for that, it would be worth attending your own funeral. Just to hear all those people who couldn't stand you say how wonderful you were...

The other looks at him, intrigued.

Two – Oh, bloody hell. The minute of silence now... They're really pulling out all the stops. *(Silence)* Writing plays by a philosopher must be boring, right?

The first one looks slightly offended. The second one wonders if he made a mistake.

Two – Did you know this... playwright?

One – I also didn't want to miss my funeral... *(Extending his hand to the other to introduce himself)* Jean-Paul...

Two *(shaking his hand)* – Jim...

One – I wouldn't have recognized you. You had long hair back then, right...?

Two – And you, didn't you have a slight squint...?

One – Only in one eye. *(Amused)* But now, I'm just an essence...

Two *(taking out a cigarette)* – Come on, baby, light my fire.

The first one, who doesn't seem to understand the joke, lights the other's cigarette.

One – Sorry, I never listened to your records...

Two – I haven't read your books either... Existentialism, isn't it?

One – Yeah...

Two *(ironically)* – To be or not to be...

The other isn't sure if Jim is teasing him or not.

One – No, that's not mine, unfortunately... Are you sure Morrison is buried at Montparnasse Cemetery?

Two – No?

One – I would say it's more likely to be Père Lachaise...

Two – Oh, bloody hell, I don't remember anything. I must have been really high... I'll regret it for the rest of my life for missing my own funeral...

6. Swift Justice

Two chairs on each side of a table. A man in an orange jumpsuit enters. A female lawyer arrives, excitedly, with her phone to her ear. She greets the man and begins to settle down. She puts her briefcase on the table and takes out a folder.

Lawyer *(on the phone)* – Look, twenty years isn't that bad. You know that with another judge and another lawyer, you could have gotten much more? Well... maybe a bit more. And with time off for good behavior, in ten years, we might hope for parole. Ten years fly by, don't they? Anyway, excuse me, I have to go, I'm with a client here. Well, yes, I know you're really innocent, but well, what can you do? You can't win them all. I'll call you back, okay? Bye-bye... *(She puts away her phone.)* What a pain...

The lawyer finally turns to the man, who has remained standing.

Lawyer *(with a commercial smile)* – It's our turn, Mr... *(Checking the name in the folder)* Martinez.

Man – Sanchez...

Lawyer – Off to a great start... Please, have a seat, Mr. Sanchez, I insist. You know, these instruction files are full of typos. And the spelling mistakes, don't get me started. You'd think all these judges are illiterate. *(Sighing)* And then they wonder why there are so many miscarriages of justice... *(Smiling again)* But don't worry, we'll get you out of this, alright? So, what exactly are you accused of...? *(Leafing through the thick file)* Let's see... Oh my... It's similar to The Great Train Robbery case. A real soap opera. I was wondering why my briefcase was so heavy. But they don't realize, right? If I had to read all this... Anyway, let me summarize: so, essentially, you hacked your wife in two with an axe, correct?

Man – No...

Lawyer – Bravo! That's exactly the answer I was expecting from you. You're innocent, even simpler. We plead not guilty and don't waste time with details. I feel we're going to do great work together, Mr. Ramirez. In fact, that's always the defense strategy I propose to my clients: deny everything outright. Even the obvious. Just plant doubt in the jurors' minds, hope for an acquittal. Well, it doesn't work every time, but believe me, it's much simpler than delving into the details. Mitigating circumstances, unhappy childhood, a moment of madness... All that is so complicated. And the result is very uncertain, you know. So here's what we'll do. You know the "yes or no" game?

Man – Yes...

Lawyer – Oh! Minus one for you: I've already caught you. But I propose a variation. You answer "no" to all the questions we ask you, alright? Never yes. Always no. Be careful, are you ready?

Man *(on the defensive)* – Mmmm...

Lawyer – Did you have any reason to hold a grudge against your dear wife...?

Man – No...

Lawyer – Do you own an axe...?

Man – No...

Lawyer – Have you ever dressed as a woman? *(Her phone rings.)* Excuse me, I'll be right with you... Yes...? Oh, yes, darling! How are you? No, I have a hair appointment at 5 p.m., and I have a dozen clients to see before. Can you stop by the caterer on your way home for our little dinner with friends? I won't have time... Oh, I invited the judge with his wife, the prosecutor with his mistress... That's already three. No, three, the prosecutor's mistress is the judge's wife. Oh, just count it as six, okay? Thank you, you're sweet. Love you loads. Me too... Alright, see you tonight...

She puts away her mobile phone.

Lawyer – So, where were we, Mr. Hernandez?

Man – Sanchez...

Lawyer – Sorry, Hernandez, that's my cleaner's name.. Or Fernandez, I don't remember. Well, anyway, you didn't kill your wife, and that's it, okay? Trust me, this way we avoid a lot of complications... And by always answering no, whatever the question, we're sure never to contradict ourselves. Anything else you'd like to tell me, Mr. Gomez?

Man – Uh... Yes...

Lawyer – Ah, I caught you again. The correct answer was no. Well, I have to go now, Mr. Gonzalez. Duty calls. I still have a lot of innocent people like you to save today... See you tomorrow at the trial? And once again, don't worry. I'm convinced of your innocence, and I'll make sure to share this conviction with all the jury members. *(With a knowing look)* In fact, I'm hosting the judge for dinner tonight, and I'll try to slip a little word in your favour between the appetizer and the cheese. *(To herself)* Before the evening really starts to go awry, like last time... Alright, see you soon, Mr. Marquez...

The lawyer exits, just as excited as she was when she came in. The man remains there, perplexed. Then he turns around. On the back of his orange jumpsuit is written "Maintenance Service."

Man – Alright, Djamel, where’s that ladder? It can’t take all day to change one light bulb!

7. Chrysanthemums

Two characters (men or women), standing side by side on stage facing the audience, looking ahead at two imaginary graves. The first one glances over at the second.

One – Well done! What a beautifully kept grave. Those flowers are magnificent.

Two – Thank you... But it's a lot of work, you know. Well, when you see the result, you forget everything else...

One – That's for sure.

Two – And your chrysanthemums? Did you buy them from the florist next door?

One – Good heavens, no. I grow them myself. Organically, too.

Two – Organic chrysanthemums. Can't beat them. *(A pause.)* And how long ago did yours die, if you don't mind me asking?

One – It'll be twenty years exactly, on December 31st.

Two – December 31st?

One – Yes. New Year's Eve. You can imagine how much I felt like celebrating...

Two – A turkey bone stuck in his throat…?

One – No, he was hit by a car... A drunk driver who didn't even have a license.

Two – It's drivers like that who ought to be put down... Still, at least he died instantly. He didn't suffer.

One – And yours?

Two – Five years ago today. It's the anniversary...

One – So it's still fresh... It leaves such a void, doesn't it?

Two – You can say that again. I got another one, but it's never the same. No one can replace him.

One – That's for sure.

Two – And what about you, did you get another one?

One – No. I didn't even feel like it. I know it wouldn't have replaced...

Two – Well... Life goes on, despite everything. Do you have any children?

One – Three. But that doesn't replace either, you know?

Two – It's not the same. Especially when they grow up and leave home.

One – If they hadn't died so young, they'd never have left us.

Two – Yes, but still... They live shorter lives than us, we know that. We should be prepared...

One – Despite everything, when it happens, it's a shock. How did you find yours?

Two – On the internet.

One – We got ours from a neighbour. She didn’t want him any more. There was no internet back then...

Two – Some people are like that... They get one, and then they realize it's not what they had imagined... So, they prefer to abandon him... It's sad, but well. Luckily, you were there to take him in... I'm sure he was very happy with you, as long as he lived...

One – Do you have a photo?

Two – Look, there's one right there on his grave.

One – Oh yes... I hadn't noticed... My God, he was so handsome... With his big ears...

Two – You should have seen him when he was younger, with that thick coat of fur. What about yours?

One *(pointing to the grave)* – Look...

Two – Oh, yes. All curls. Such a sweet face...

One – He was a sweetheart...

They sigh.

One – Well, we'll have to go. I think they're waiting for us to close.

Two – Do you come here often?

One – As often as possible. But it's quite far... And you?

Two – I live nearby, fortunately. I can come every day...

One – Then we'll surely see each other again.

Two – God willing.

They begin to leave.

One – And yours, what did he die from?

Two – Oh... A long illness, as they say when they don’t want to give details. In the end he was in such pain I had to have him put down.

One – Come on, think that where they are now, they no longer suffer.

Two – Do you think there's a paradise for them too?

One – Who knows? They’ve got cemeteries, haven’t they?

8. Champagne

A woman is enjoying a glass of champagne. There is a knock at the door.

Two *(off)* – It's the police!

The woman goes to open the door.

One – Come in, please. I was expecting you.

The second woman enters.

One – Are you alone?

Two – Well, my colleague had something to deal with. We're understaffed, you know...

One – Nothing serious, I hope?

Two – No... A dealer who got attacked by his pitbull.

One – Is he dead?

Two – The pit bull? Just joking. But the dog took off one of his arms and wouldn't let go. We had to sedate it.

One – The dealer? I'm kidding...

They both laugh.

Two – Anyway, he's downstairs in the police van... I hope he won't wake up too soon...

A pause.

Two – So... where is it?

One *(nodding towards a room)* – Over there, in the bedroom.

Two – Well, I'll go take a look, if you don't mind...?

The policewoman steps into the bedroom, then returns almost at once.

Two – And... if I may ask, how did you do it? I mean, looking at you like this... But you don't have to answer, of course.

One – With a serrated knife.

Two – A serrated knife?

One – An electric carving knife. Battery-powered.

Two *(impressed)* – And you were going to carry the pieces out? In a bin bag, perhaps?

One – I wouldn't have called you...

Two – Fair enough.

One – Champagne?

Two – Well... why not, after all!

She pours her a glass.

Two – Thank you. Cheers!

They drink in silence.

One – Aren't you going to handcuff me?

Two – You only had one husband?

One – Yes.

Two – Then I guess you won't be doing it again anytime soon.

They exchange smiles.

Two – Nice and cold... Tell me, why only two pieces? Did the batteries run out?

One – My husband couldn’t choose between his wife and his mistress. So I opted for an equal division.

Two – Men, they're all the same...

One – Are you married?

Two – Widowed.

One – I'm sorry...

Two – No, it's okay...

One – Don't tell me you too...

Two – Oh no... I could never have joined the police... They are a bit less strict on recruitment now, but well, having a criminal record is never a good thing... No, my husband died stupidly. From some virus...

One *(sympathetic)* – Swine flu?

Two – Not even that! Just a silly flu, I'm telling you... One day he came home with a slight fever. I gave him a hot toddy and sent him to bed. The next day, he was dead.

One *(joking)* – If I catch a cold, remind me not to come to you for treatment...

They laugh heartily.

One – More champagne?

Two – You understand why I'm not putting handcuffs on you...

She refills her glass with a smile.

Two – And do you know her?

One – Who?

Two – His mistress!

One – Not personally. I just know she works in the police.

Two – No way! A colleague! Oh, you know, there are bitches everywhere. Even in the police force...

One – Can I ask you something?

Two – Go ahead...

One – Do you believe in coincidences?

Two – You know, in my line of work...

One – Then believe me, it's no coincidence that you're here.

Two – Alexander?

One – That's my husband.

Two – He told me he was widowed too!

One – Just goes to show anyone can be mistaken.

Two – My goodness... I didn't even recognize him, to be honest. But you've done a good job with him... So, you must be angry with me, right?

One – He lied to you too...

Two – The bastard. So what do we do now?

One – I told you. We share. Would you prefer the top half... or the bottom?

Two – Well, it isn't that simple. I have to file a report. It'll be hard to pass this off as a household accident...

One – A suicide?

Two – A guy committing hara-kiri with a battery-powered knife...?

One – Then we'll have to get rid of the body. Any ideas?

Two – The pitbull?

One – Those are rather large chunks...

Two – It's a big pitbull.

One – I'll have to go out and buy some more batteries...

9. A Fatal Eulogy

One character stands in contemplation in front of an open casket, next to which stands a vase on a pedestal. Another character arrives.

Two – Hello... *(Hesitant)* Do you recognize me? Dominique.

One – Oh, yes, of course... It's been such a long time...

Two – As soon as I heard, I came right away.

One – Yes, me too...

Two – I hadn't seen him since school. I'm not sure I'd have recognised him. He's changed...

One – He's dead...

Two – He really was an unforgettable teacher.

One – Clearly. Thirty years later, we still remember him.

Two – There are teachers like that, who leave a lasting impression on you.

One – That's for sure...

Two – I'm not sure if, without him, I'd still remember all my German declensions by heart.

One – He was an excellent educator...

Two – Mmm... Maybe a bit too strict.

One – Yeah... Mr. Furer...

Two – We used to call him Adolf.

One – It wasn't mean...

Two – Kids can be cruel sometimes. It was all in good fun.

One – Well, there wasn't much laughing when he was around...

Two – Do you remember when he broke your finger with his ruler because he caught you picking your nose?

One – Oh, I remember... Look, I still have the mark. And you, when he hung you on the coat rack for the whole hour because you mixed up the dative and the genitive?

Two – I still have a red mark around my neck...

One – As you said, there are teachers who leave a lasting impression on you.

Two – Seeing him lying there like that, with his little mustache... Thirty years later...

One – Yeah... I wouldn't have missed this for anything... I live in Madrid now... And you?

Two – In Los Angeles.

One – Your German declensions can't be of much use to you either... Anyway, that's all in the past now.

Two – Yes. It was a different time...

One – Let's not badmouth him now that he's not here to defend himself.

Two – You're right... May his soul rest in peace.

A solemn silence.

One – His eyes weren't closed earlier, were they?

Two – I don't know. Yes, perhaps... I think so...

One – I have the feeling he's looking at us...

Two – With the same angry stare as before...

One – What if he wasn't really dead...

The other character grabs the vase and strikes the corpse on the head.

Two – There. Now we're sure he's dead.

One – Could we get into trouble for this?

Two – We couldn’t risk having him cremated alive.

One – You're right. It's the last favour we could do for him...

Two – He wasn't too fond of Jews, was he?

They prepare to leave.

One – By the way, have you seen any other classmates from middle school?

10. Consultation

A man enters a doctor's office. The doctor is sitting at his desk, busy filling out a form.

Doctor – Please, have a seat...

Patient – Thank you.

Doctor – So... What brings you here?

Patient – Well... I'm not sure how to put this... I think I've caught Death.

Doctor – Oh, you know, these days, that's all we hear about... There's a virus going around... Believe me, it's non-stop... So? Runny nose... A tickle in the throat... A bit of fatigue...

Patient – No, no, I'm perfectly fine, Doctor... I'm not sick... What I mean is... I really caught Death.

The doctor looks slightly taken aback.

Doctor – Yes... *(Trying to regain composure)* Well, we'll still prescribe you a preventive treatment, just in case... *(He takes out a prescription and starts writing it like a robot.)* So... A little cocktail of vitamins to boost your immune system, which might be a bit sluggish due to the cold... A throat syrup, one tablespoon in the morning, at noon, and in the evening... Paracetamol only if you have headaches... *(He hands the prescription to the patient.)* There you go, with all that, you shouldn't be bothered too much this winter... *(But the patient doesn't take the prescription.)*

Patient – I knew it wouldn't be easy...

Doctor *(surprised)* – It's a completely standard treatment, you know. I prescribe it at least thirty times a day currently...

Patient – Doctor, I've caught Death. She's locked in my old Ford Fiesta, in the garage.

Doctor *(snapping out of it)* – Tell me about it...

Patient – Well... Last night, I decided to end my life...

Doctor – Mmm...

Patient – Guns aren't my thing, and gas could be dangerous for the neighbours. You have to think of those left behind...

Doctor – Certainly...

Patient – So I went into the garage. I sealed the door with wet towels, like they do in old television dramas. Then I started my Fiesta. That took some doing. It smokes like a tractor and makes almost as much noise. I ought to replace the catalytic converter, but for once it seemed an advantage. I sat behind the wheel, turned on the radio and left the engine running. I was drifting off into what I thought would be my final sleep when I saw her in the rear-view mirror, sitting right behind me...

Doctor – Who?

Patient – Death!

Doctor – Ah, yes, of course...

Patient – I shouldn't have been so surprised. I was doing everything I needed to find her. But you know what amazed me?

Doctor – No...

Patient – She looked exactly the way I'd always imagined her.

Doctor – What do you mean?

Patient – Long black cloak, scythe, the lot! You assume it's just a picture someone made up. Nobody has ever actually seen Death. It's like God: perhaps we'll meet him one day, but nobody's come back with photographs. And if he exists, he's hardly likely to be an old man with a beard who looks like Father Christmas...

Doctor – No, obviously...

Patient – Well, that's what freaked me out all of a sudden. To see her like that. Exactly as I had imagined her...

Doctor – Yes, that... Must have been a shock...

Patient – In any case, believe me, it woke me up! I don't know what came over me, but I turned off the engine and got out of the car like a madman, slamming the door behind me. And there, luckily, I had the right reflex...

Doctor – Oh, yeah...?

Patient – I still had the key to my Ford Fiesta in my hand. I immediately pressed it to lock the doors. Not much works in this car anymore, but that still does. It was one of the first models to be equipped with it at the time. I even hesitated to take that option, I'm not into gadgets, but you know how it is. It was the only model immediately available at the garage. It was either that or wait for the ordered one for months...

Doctor – Yes, I know how it is... I just got a new Mercedes, and I had to take the cigarette lighter, even though I quit smoking five years ago... And believe me, just the cigarette lighter option, on a car like that... It's almost the price of a second-hand Ford Fiesta... Yes, well, what happened next?

Patient – I was saved! Death was trapped in the car. I could see that black cloak pressed against the window as she tried to get out. But she couldn't! I'd locked Death in my Fiesta!

Doctor – Alright... So, you really don't want the syrup...?

Patient – Don't you understand what I'm telling you? I caught Death!

Doctor – Yes, yes... I... I can refer you to a colleague if you want...? Wait, I must have his address here, in my directory...

He searches but doesn't find it, then picks up his phone.

Doctor – Yes, Christel. Can you give me Dr. Müller's phone number? At the psychiatric center, yes... *(He scribbles something on a piece of paper.)* Thanks... *(He hangs up and hands the piece of paper to the patient.)* There you go, you can see him on my behalf, and explain what's happening to you, okay? I'm sure he'll be very interested...

Patient *(taking the paper)* – Thanks... And what about my Ford Fiesta, what do I do?

Doctor – What do you mean...?

Patient – I'm going to need the car again, now that I've given up the idea of killing myself with carbon monoxide. But if I open the door, Death will get out and start cutting people down again!

Doctor – Cutting people down? With what?

Patient – With her scythe! I'm talking about Death!

Doctor – Ah, yes, of course...

Patient – It's a huge responsibility. Didn't you see the news yesterday? No dying celebrities, no earthquakes, no school-bus accidents. Obviously. Death's locked in my car!

Doctor (whether serious or not is impossible to tell) – But if she stays there too long, just think of the consequences. A disaster for the news media, charities, undertakers, pension schemes and people who buy life annuities...

Patient *(annoyed)* – I feel like you're not taking me seriously...

Doctor – Please don't take offense; I absolutely don't question the truth of what you just told me. But are you absolutely sure it wasn't someone else on the back seat? Maybe your wife, for instance...

Patient – My wife doesn't wear a burqa! And by the way, we got divorced last year. It hit me hard, actually. It's one of the reasons that pushed me to the brink of suicide...

Doctor – But you said yourself you were nearly unconscious. A lack of oxygen can cause hallucinations. Perhaps you thought of your wife, the happy times you'd had, and imagined seeing her...

Patient – With a burqa and a scythe...?

The doctor seems puzzled. The patient reflects.

Patient – It's true that for the burqa... It was more like a black scarf tied around her neck... And for the scythe, I'm not completely sure... It could have been a broomstick as well... But witches also have broomsticks and wear black scarves!

Doctor – Hmm...

Patient – And how do you explain that this morning, when I went back to my garage after a good night's sleep, she was still there, behind the rear window of my Ford Fiesta? She even tried to tell me something...

Doctor – Oh, really?

Patient – I couldn’t hear her, so she wrote something in a strange language that looked vaguely like Portuguese and held it against the windscreen.

Doctor – Portuguese?

Patient – That surprised me a bit too...

Doctor – And what was written on that paper?

Patient – Well, I have no idea... I don't understand Portuguese... I should ask my cleaning lady. She's Portuguese, as it happens... But it's strange, she didn't come this morning as usual... No, I assure you, Doctor. I caught Death...

Doctor – Mmm... I'll still prescribe a mild sedative for the time being... It will help you relax...

Patient – Do you think so...?

The doctor nods, and starts scribbling something on a prescription.

11. Two Unknowns

A character stands facing the audience, looking at a tomb. Another approaches.

Two – Excuse me, is this the tomb of the unknown author?

One – No, this is the tomb of the Unknown Soldier.

Two – Are you sure?

One – Hard to say, when nobody's name is on it. *(Takes out a map.)* They gave me this at the entrance. Let's see... W28. Yes, the Unknown Soldier. Between the Unsung Genius and the Anonymous Alcoholic. The Unknown Author is just behind us, at X29.

Two – I wonder if it was such a good idea to put them all in the same cemetery...

One – Yes, that's right. The secret agent is X27. *(Silent moment, each in front of their grave)* Was this one related to you?

Two – This one or another one. Who knows! I was born of an unknown father...

One – Oh, I see... *(He looks at his map again)* The unknown father... No, really, I don't understand any of this. They could have at least put an alphabetical index. And this grid with letters and numbers is just ridiculous... It's like a battleship game! A5, miss... C10, hit... B12, sunk...

Two – And you?

One – The unknown soldier?... That was my father...

Two – Really? And... did you follow in his footsteps?

One – What can I do? The military career is a longstanding tradition in our family. Soldiers, generation after generation. In fact, I already have a place reserved in the family vault

Two – I never knew my father, you see...

One – You didn't know? Yes, yes, of course! My whole family is buried there. A long line of very discreet military men. You know: the Silent Army...

Two – The Silent Navy...?

One – The Silent Army!

Two – Ah, yes... I understood Silent Navy. I thought you were in the navy. Because of the battleship game...

One – So, you're searching for your father?

Two – Yes.

One – And what would you ask your father if you could meet him one day? Here or in another world?

Two – His identification papers...?

One – Yes...

Two – And you?

One – Permission to search him. Just to make sure he's not carrying any weapons…

Two – It's not easy every day, you know, to be unaware of your origins.

One – That's what I always tell my men at the barracks. When you don't know where you come from, you can't know where you're going. To wage war, you need a good plan. And you need to know how to read it. Why do you think that for centuries, women were refused in the army? Because they can't read a plan! They already struggle with a road map, or even a shopping list. So imagine a battle plan… And you? What do you do in life?

Two – Theatre.

One – Oh, yes, the... The theatre.

Two – An actor.

One – Yes.

Two – Are you familiar with it?

One – No. The performing arts, right? I'm the Silent Army, you're the performing arts… Labels still help us find our way a bit, don't they? And... are you a famous actor?

Two – No. I'm an unknown actor.

One – Well, in that case, it's been a pleasure not meeting you.

Two – I won't say goodbye...

One – Neither will I.

The first glances at one last tomb.

One – Look, that one isn't even on my map...

Two – It's the tomb of... the Unknown Man.

One – The unknown man...?

Two – Perhaps a homeless man...

One – Even the homeless deserve a final resting place…

The first one leaves. The second one remains alone.

Two – Where was I...?

12. Dying of Laughter

A police officer observes a coroner examining a corpse.

Police Officer – How long ago did the death occur, Doctor?

Coroner – The body is still warm. I'd say two or three hours.

Police Officer – It was a cleaning lady who found the body, slumped in his chair.

Coroner – Hmm...

Police Officer – Do you know what caused his death?

Coroner – The tests will confirm it, but I believe I'm not mistaken, Officer, when I say that this man died from laughter...

Police Officer – That's quite unusual, indeed.

Coroner – A fit of helpless laughter. The facial muscles gave way. I needn't draw you a picture.

Police Officer – Do you know what could have triggered this fatal burst of laughter?

Coroner – You said he was found in his armchair. It was at his home, in front of the TV...?

Police Officer – No.

Coroner – At the movies?

Police Officer – At the theatre.

Coroner – Even more surprising. Usually when we find a spectator slumped in his seat after a show, it's because he's dozed off...

Police Officer – Are you sure this man is not simply asleep? Very deeply...

Coroner – Mistake a deep sleep for clinical death? Come now, Inspector, I'm not an amateur. What was the victim watching?

Police Officer – My officers are questioning the theatre manager and checking the listings. We've put out a warrant for the alleged playwright, on suspicion of involuntary manslaughter.

Coroner – Involuntary?

Police Officer – According to the manager, the writer thought he'd written a tragedy. That'll be his defence, anyway. I know how to make a suspect talk.

Coroner – You're right, Officer. We can't let people like that run free. If we can't go to the theatre without risking death by laughter…

Police Officer – It seems he's still shaking with a few spasms. Are you absolutely sure he's dead?

Coroner – It's just the nerves. Trust me, Officer. This man is dead as dead can be.

Police Officer – Do you think he saw himself die?

Coroner – Why? Do you think his testimony could have helped your investigation? Just kidding... You know, in my line of work, with all that we see... It's better to lighten the mood... Just last week, I autopsied a guy who died of boredom...

Police Officer – At the theatre as well? We might be dealing with a serial killer who changes his modus operandi each time to throw us off the track...

Coroner – These days, it's more common to die of boredom at the theatre than of laughter. No, it was simply during a dinner at his mother-in-law's...

Police Officer – I see... Do you think the autopsy will reveal other interesting elements?

Coroner – The examination of the stomach contents shows that before this tragedy, the victim had eaten in a Chinese restaurant. Spring rolls, to be precise...

Police Officer – Spring rolls?

Coroner – I am absolutely certain about this point. And then ginger chicken with Cantonese rice.

Police Officer – No dessert?

Coroner – None. But you know, it's not very surprising. Well... desserts in Chinese restaurants...

Police Officer – Do you think it could have any connection to the death?

Coroner – None at all.

Police Officer – Okay...

The Police Officer is about to leave.

Police Officer – Dying of laughter... And to think that I have to break the news to his family...

Coroner – I know. You have a difficult job too. Come to dinner one evening. You need to unwind now and then...

Police Officer – Alright... I'll talk to my wife about it. *(Puzzled)* I swear, it looks like he's still convulsed with laughter...

Coroner – It's just the nerves, I tell you...

13. Outside

They are sitting. He is reading, and she is knitting. Or the other way around.

Her – It's nice to have a bit of peace and quiet.

Him – Yes.

Her – With all the commotion out there.

Him – Yes.

Her – We're so much better off at home.

Him – Yes.

Her – I can't even remember when it was...

Him – When what?

Her – The last time I went out!

Him – Oh, yes. Outside...

Her – And you?

Him – Me?

Her – When was it?

Him – The last time you went outside?

Her – The last time you went outside!

Him – Oh, me! Outside... I don't know... It must have been... To take the dog out...

Her – The dog? He's dead.

Him – No?

Her – That was years ago.

Him – Oh, right… I was wondering why the dog didn't pee very often…

Her – Well?

Him – So what?

Her – When was the last time you went outside? Do you remember?

Him – Oh, me! Outside... I don't know... It must have been... To take out the trash...

Her – The trash?

Him – Why not the trash?

Her – We've got a trash chute.

Him – Oh, yes... I thought so… This trash doesn't fill up very fast. And where is the dog buried?

Her – In the garden.

Him – I had to go outside to bury the dog. The garden is outside… isn't it?

Her – Well, no...

Him – Ah...

Her – You know what?

Him – What?

Her – It may sound strange, but I don't think I've ever really been outside... The dog used to do his business on the lawn. Before we buried him under it.

Him – Mmmm... Me neither... At least, I don't remember. I would remember, wouldn't I?

Her – Probably.

Him – Besides, what would we even do outside?

Her – We're so peaceful here. *(Doorbell rings)* What's that?

Him – The doorbell...

Her – I wonder what it could be...

Him – I'll go check...

He leaves and comes back a moment later.

Her – So?

Him – It was the postman.

Her – Ah... What did he say?

Him – Nothing. He was already gone. But he left a letter.

Her – Postmen always do that. I don't like letters. I'm always afraid it's bad news. Is it bad news?

Him *(looking at the letter)* – It's a death notice.

Her – About...?

Him – About a death.

Her – Ah... Whose?

Him – Mr and Mrs Dumortier.

Her – Both of them?

Him – Apparently.

Her – Did we know them?

Him – Funny you should ask. *(He takes an identity card from his wallet.)* Mr Dumortier is me.

Her – So I'm Mrs Dumortier?

Him – Probably.

Her – Are we married?

Him – Either way... we're dead.

Her – We should write to them and let them know it's a mistake.

Him – Yes.

Her – But for that, we'd have to go outside.

Him – I don't know if I'll have the courage.

Her – We're so comfortable at home.

Him – Do you think it's a mistake...?

She shrugs, as if to say she has no idea.

14. Death Notice

A woman is on stage, at a loose end. Beethoven's "Für Elise" may be playing softly. The doorbell rings three times. She goes to open it. A postman enters.

Denise – I knew it was you.

Postman – The postman always rings three times!

Denise – I don't open the door to just anyone, you know. With everything going on these days…

Postman – A letter for you, Denise. *(He fishes an envelope out of his bag.)* There we are. A letter for Denise...

Denise *(taking it)* – For once, it's not a bill. A glass of wine, as usual?

Postman – Go on, then. A glass of wine would be just the thing!

She places a bottle and a glass in front of him.

Denise – Help yourself. You know the place.

While he serves himself, she glances at the address and becomes upset.

Denise – It's my mother's handwriting...

Postman – Well, if she's writing to you... It means she's not dead, right?

Denise opens the letter anxiously and reads it.

Denise – Oh, my God...!

Postman – Is she dead?

Denise – It's worse than that...

Postman – More serious?

Denise – She forbids me from attending her funeral!

Postman – But... she's not dead, then?

Denise – I guess she wants to tell me beforehand...

Postman – Ah. Wise of her to warn you in advance, I suppose. She won't be writing the funeral announcement herself, will she?

Denise *(distracted)* – Unusual?

Postman *(laughing and already a little tipsy)* – Can you imagine? My funeral will take place at the village cemetery, sharp at ten o'clock. No flowers, no wreaths. And please don't come.

Denise gives him a fiery look.

Denise – Do you find that funny?

Postman *(recovering)* – But... are you on bad terms with your mother?

Denise – Why do you think she forbids me from attending her funeral?

Postman – I don't know... Maybe she wants to spare you the chore... Funerals, in general...

Denise – No. It’s her latest way of tormenting me. Even as a child, she forbade me everything. Don’t do this. Don’t do that. Don’t pick your nose. Don’t swear. Don’t put the cat in the washing machine. I wasn’t allowed to do a thing.

Postman – Ah, I see...

Denise – So, at eighteen, I left home... I haven't seen her since...

Postman – Home...?

Denise – My mother!

Postman – Well, that's not very cheerful... Here, I'll pour myself another... So what are you going to do?

Denise – I swore I wouldn't go to her funeral anyway.

Postman – So everything ends well. I mean... In the end, you're not going, and at the same time, you're respecting her last wishes...

Denise – Are you kidding? My mother forbids me from attending her funeral, and I would obey her? Can you imagine? Even in death she'd still be bossing me around?

Postman – So, are you going to go?

Denise – I don't know... Then again, maybe that's exactly what she had in mind…

Postman – What...?

Denise – She knows that the best way to get me to attend her funeral is to forbid me from going...

Postman – Of course...

Denise – What would you do in my shoes?

Postman – Well, I always got on with my mother. Especially since she died. But yours is still alive. You’ve got time to think about it...

Denise – Yes...

Postman – How old is she?

Denise – 48 years old.

Postman – Well then... You have your whole life to think about it...

Denise – I wonder if that’s exactly what she’s counting on...

Postman – Well, I better get going. I have other letters to deliver. I hope they're bills, it's less complicated...

Denise – One more for the road?

Postman – Okay, but the last one then...

15. Travelling

A woman is seated at a desk. A man enters. He flips through some brochures. The phone rings.

Her – Travelling Agency, can I help you? Oh, Mrs Seventy-eight Twenty-four, I was just thinking of you. How are you? Wonderful... And Mr Seventy-eight Twenty-four? Good... For your wedding anniversary? Ask him for the moon! A second honeymoon? That sounds perfect. Come into the agency and I'll give you the brochure... Yes, Mrs Seventy-eight... Very good, Mrs Seventy... Of course, Mrs Seven... I must go now, I have a customer. Same to you. *(Hangs up.)* Can I help you, sir?

Him – I'm still not entirely sure...

Her – I understand. There are so many possible destinations. It's not easy to make a choice, is it?

Him – I loved travelling... once upon a time.

Her – I can advise you. Were you thinking of travelling through space? Through time? Both?

Him – You may think I'm foolish, but I've never travelled in time.

Her – Really? Prehistory is all the rage. Especially the Jurassic. Dinosaur safaris are booming. Absolutely lethal! Everybody wants to bring home a Tyrannosaurus head to hang above the fireplace. Honestly, even without that meteorite at the end of the Cretaceous, today's tourists would have finished the dinosaurs off.

Him – I prefer something a bit more peaceful.

Her – I understand. I feel the same way. Crowds on vacation... The only advantage with the Jurassic period is that it's not very regulated.

Him – Oh, really...?

Her – Back then there were no humans, and almost all the animals from that cosmic game of billiards have disappeared anyway. So the impact of tourism on the present is tiny. In the Jurassic you can do practically anything and get away with it. Believe me, people take full advantage.

Him – What about the time-travel customs officers?

Her – You don't even need a temporal passport for the Jurassic!

Him – I still rather prefer old-fashioned travel. Geography rather than history. I've never even been to the United States of Asia.

Her – Listen, I don't want to be a downer, but you know, with globalization these days, it's all pretty much the same everywhere...

Him – To that extent...?

Her – Travelling around the planet is mostly for businessmen… Or maybe a little cruise in the solar system... But well... There isn't much to do other than taking photos from the portholes. You hardly leave the spacecraft. Oh, of course, it's very comfortable, I won't deny that. Swimming pool, restaurant, casino, duty-free shopping... But it's mostly for older people... In fact, I just proposed a moon cruise to one of our best clients for their 5000th wedding anniversary.

Him – I see. What would you recommend, then?

Her – Personally, I'm a big fan of the 2000s... It's not too far... There are very few tourists... Of course, you need to follow a few simple rules. The time customs officers keep a close eye on things…, it's still quite strict. But it's not as restrictive as you might think. It's a bit like the Jurassic period, after all…

Him – I'm not sure I follow...

Her – For the opposite reasons, of course. Since it's quite close to us in time, you just need to adopt the fashion of that era, which was quite elegant, especially for ladies, and give up for a while everything that progress has brought us. You'll blend in easily with the population! No, really, the 2000s are quite fun.

Him – Really? That's curious, I hadn't thought of it that way. But why not, indeed…

Her – Well, not to settle there permanently, of course. But for a week or two, it's quite exotic. Without being too tiring, actually. And, believe me, the food in the 2000s was really good. For those lucky enough to have something on their plates, of course. No, because I don't know if you've ever tasted brontosaurus steak, but… You have to like game meat to start with, right? No, a Cretaceous barbecue might be very quaint, but for me, it's not worth a Big Mac Combo in one of those early traditional fast-food places… I assure you, in the 2000s, it tasted completely different from the freeze-dried burgers they serve us today…

Him – It's tempting, that's true... I hadn't thought of that... But...

Her – Yes...?

Him – I was also considering a more… permanent kind of journey.

Her – I see. What we call here the last journey.

Him – Exactly.

Her – Why not... If you've thought it through...

Him – I've been thinking about it for some time now.

Her – Well, I'm sure in that case, you need to be certain. Because it's a one-way ticket…

Him – I don't want to come back, I assure you.

Her – I'll need a medical certificate, of course.

Him – I brought it with me, just in case...

Her – When would you like to leave?

Him – Well... Right now, if possible. Once you've decided, why wait, right?

Her – All perfectly in order, Mr... Dumortier. Still using paper documents, I see. I ought to tell you off...

He hands her the documents, which she examines one by one.

Her – Perfect. Everything seems to be in order, Mr... Dumortier. I see you haven't switched to digital yet either. I ought to scold you...

Him – Now, it's no longer worth it, is it?

Her – No luggage? Just a joke, to ease the tension. This is an important decision, Mr Dumortier.

Him – I am fully aware of that.

Her – It is an extraordinary journey, full of mysteries. More and more people request it now that we're allowed to provide the service. People have been everywhere else. They've seen it all.

Him – At least with this journey, you don't come back.

Her – Are you starting to feel a bit cramped among us?

Him – Let's just say... I feel a bit weary, especially.

Her – I understand... Immortality has its perks, of course. But it's true that one can get tired of it...

Him – Especially when it lasts too long.

Her – Then all that remains is to wish you a pleasant journey, Mr Dumortier.

She takes a pistol from a drawer and aims it at him. Two muffled gunshots are heard, through a silencer.

Her – I shouldn't laugh, but that noise always amuses me. I don't know why...

16. Double Life

A notary's office. A woman in mourning enters and sits. She glances at the papers on the desk, resists the temptation to touch them, then reaches towards an envelope. Another woman in mourning enters unnoticed and clears her throat. The first jumps.

Woman 1 – You scared me...

Woman 2 – I'm terribly sorry. I didn't realise... *(She offers her hand.)* Agnès.

Woman 1 – You know my name?

Woman 2 *(surprised)* – No, Agnès is my name. I'm the widow.

Woman 1 – What?

Woman 2 – You're also named Agnès?

Woman 1 – But I'm the widow!

Woman 2 – Excuse me?

Woman 1 – Who does she think she is, this hussy?

Woman 2 – Say that again, you cow!

They're about to jump at each other's throats when the notary arrives with a cup of coffee in hand.

Notary – Would you like some coffee?

The two women regain a more dignified composure.

Woman 1 – No, thank you, I'm fine.

Woman 2 – We're upset enough as it is.

Notary – Please, have a seat... *(Both women sit down.)* First of all, allow me to offer my condolences.

The first woman sheds a tear. The notary hands her a box of tissues, and she takes one.

Woman 1 – Thank you.

The other woman rolls her eyes with an exasperated expression.

Notary – Very well. Now that we're all here, we can proceed with the reading of the will.

Woman 1 – All here?

Notary – Unless we're waiting for a third Agnès...

Woman 2 – Excuse me, but I think there's a little misunderstanding...

Notary – I'm coming to that, madam. *(He picks up an envelope and clears his throat.)* I'll be brief. As you may already have guessed from finding yourselves together in this office, Mr Barbarin led a double life.

Woman 1 – A double life?

Woman 2 – I assure you, we had no hint of that at all until now...

Notary – After his sudden disappearance under tragic and rather murky circumstances, Mr Barbarin leaves two widows and two sons. Both sons are named Baptiste.

Woman 1 – Your son is also named Baptiste?

Notary – Choosing two wives called Agnès and naming both his sons Baptiste certainly saved a man with a double life from many awkward slips.

Woman 2 *(devastated)* – That's clear...

Notary – It appears that your shared husband's estate consists mainly of a house in Tarascon-sur-Rhône and another in Tarascon-sur-Ariège. During one of his many journeys between these two French towns, Mr Barbarin's car was apparently swept away by a swollen river in a storm.

The two women exchange a hostile glance.

Notary – Without further ado, I'll read his last wishes. *(He opens the envelope.)* First, Mr Barbarin asked to be cremated. At least that's one thing you needn't worry about. He appears to have been a very organised man, and he made all the arrangements. I'll give you the details...

In a clumsy motion, the notary spills his coffee onto the will.

Notary – Oh, damn! *(He uses a tissue to blot the coffee off the will.)* Sorry. Don't worry, I'll sort it out. Let's see if this wretched thing is still legible... Right, in short, Mr Barbarin leaves his house in Tarascon to...

Woman 1 – Tarascon-sur-Rhône or Tarascon-sur-Ariège?

Notary – Unfortunately, the coffee has obliterated the word after Tarascon. At any rate, the house goes to his wife Agnès and son Baptiste.

Woman 2 – Which Agnès?

Woman 1 – Which Baptiste?

Notary – I assure you, he didn't specify...

Woman 2 – This is unbelievable!

Woman 1 – But then, how do you expect us to...

The notary's phone rings, and he answers.

Notary – Excuse me just a moment... Yes? No? Oh yes? Oh no! Okay... Okay... Okay... Thank you... *(He hangs up.)* So, I have good news and bad news.

Woman 2 – I must admit, I'm quite curious to know what the good news might be...

Notary – Your husband did not drown in the Ariège after all, as we first believed...

The two women exchange looks of dismay.

Notary – According to the latest findings, Mr Barbarin managed to scramble back onto the bank after a gust of wind blew him into the river while he was walking his dog, Tobby. Apparently, he never went anywhere without the dog.

Woman 1 – Our dog is also named Tobby!

Woman 2 – It's the same one...

Notary – So, where dogs were concerned, it seems your husband was at least monogamous.

Woman 1 – So that bastard is still alive?

Notary – Unfortunately, he then got back into his car and drove on. But as he reached Tarascon-sur-Rhône, a fresh gust of the mistral blew the vehicle into the Rhône. The police recovered his Twingo a few minutes ago.

Woman 2 – So it was the Rhône...

Woman 1 – Obviously it was the Rhône! In Tarascon-sur-Rhône! Is she really that dim?

The other woman gives her a murderous look.

Notary – Mr Barbarin really was unlucky. He'd have been better off leaving the car at home that day.

Woman 1 – It was my Baptiste's birthday...

Woman 2 – Mine too...

Notary – A run of bad luck, perhaps. I mean the two drownings, of course...

Woman 2 – Perhaps a man who leads a double life is destined to die twice.

Notary – Though, as Heraclitus famously observed, you can never step into the same river twice. *(A pause.)* I'm joking...

Woman 1 – What was the good news, then?

Notary – The good news is that Tobby the dog was found alive. We could arrange shared custody...

Woman 1 – Is that all there is in the will?

Awkward silence.

Notary – Oh, yes... No, sorry, just a moment. Here's the music your husband chose for his cremation.

He presses a remote control. The opening of "Light My Fire" is heard, together with a few barks.

17. Tunnel

Two men (or two women), standing side by side, looking straight ahead.

One – Well, here we are, it's the end.

Two – Looks like it...

One – Do you think there's something after?

Two – Who knows...

One – Honestly, I don't really believe it.

Two – We'll find out...

One – We weren't doing so bad here. It wasn't paradise, but it wasn't hell either.

Two – As they say: you know what you're leaving, but not what you'll find.

One – I think I see something now.

Two – Me too...

One – Looks like a tunnel.

Two – With a blinding light at the end.

One – So far, it matches what we were told...

Two – I'm not sure if that's a good sign.

One – It's quite narrow. We're never going to fit through together...

Two – You go first, I've got your back.

One – Brave, but not reckless...

Two – Anyway, we can't stay here, so...

One – Yes, I think we'll be kicked out soon...

Two – Alright, here I go...

One – Tell me, what do you see?

Two – Wait, I'm stuck... There, I can see the exit!

One – So?

Two – You'll never believe it...

One – What?

Two – It looks like a hospital room...

One – So, we might not be really dead then?

Two – It's worse than that...

One – What do you mean, worse?

Two – It's not really a hospital...

One – Then what is it?

Two – There's some idiot staring at me as I come out. With this stupid grin on his face… Damn it, we're in a maternity ward!

One – Oh no... Not again...

Two – It makes me want to cry...

Sound of a crying baby.

Series Finale

Two women (or two men) sit opposite each other at a table, each holding a bound script.

One *(with a distressed look)* – Good thing we didn't bring the author here, isn't it? Because there's still quite a bit of work to do.

Two *(with a knowing look)* – Oh dear...

One – His first play was really good, though. Really funny. I don't understand...

Two – The second one is always the hardest. Everyone knows that.

One – Mmm...

The first one starts flipping through the manuscript and reads silently with a grim expression. The second one also skims through it, glancing at the first one from time to time, trying to turn the pages simultaneously.

One – Look, we're already on page three and we haven't laughed once.

Two nods with a remorseful expression.

Two *(with a commercial smile)* – Would you like some coffee?

The other doesn't bother responding, continuing to read and turn the pages. Suddenly, she stops at a line and bursts into laughter.

One – Well, this is actually quite funny...

She continues to laugh as the second one watches, not sure which page the first one is on and attempting to verify by peering at the opposite text.

One *(seeing that the other isn't laughing)* – You don't find this funny?

The other finally locates the mentioned line.

Two – Oh, absolutely. *(Forces a belated laugh.)* Brilliant. Just like his first play...

The first one regains her composure and resumes turning the pages as she reads.

Two *(gaining confidence)* – Oh, and this one is not bad either...

She bursts out laughing, unable to stop herself... Until she notices the other staring at her with a dismayed expression.

One – You find that funny?

Two – Well, not really. It's true that it's not very subtle, but...

One – Ah, because you were starting to worry me there... Personally, I can't stand this kind of humour.

Two – It's undeniable that it's quite heavy. He used to do better, that's for sure...

The two women continue to turn the pages in sync with their reading. Spontaneously, they both stop at the same page and start laughing deeply, their laughter growing in

intensity. They laugh together with tears in their eyes for a while. The first one gradually calms down, followed by the second one.

One – I have to admit, that really is funny. *(She grows serious.)* But just because it makes us laugh... will the audience laugh?

Two – Not sure...

One – Exactly!

Two – Maybe it's a bit too quirky.

One – We need something irreverent but a bit more...

Two – Mainstream.

One – Mmm...

The first one seems to ponder, and the other observes cautiously, hesitating to intervene.

One – I had an idea...

Two – Yes...

One – Wouldn't it be funnier if the main character came from Martinique?

Two *(taken aback)* – Brazilian...

One – You know what people from the Caribbean are like...

Two – Um... Yes, quite well. My spouse is from Rio...

One – So laid-back, so physical... *(Laughs.)* And that accent!

Two – To have a nice evening and not overthink things.

One – I'm telling you: a man from Martinique, or nothing. You can discuss it with the author.

Two – No problem, I'll take care of it.

One – We already paid him an advance anyway. He can swallow that too, can't he?

Two – Still not interested in coffee?

One – I really think we've got something here.

Two – It completely changes the play's perspective.

One – I'm sure we'll be a hit. Sometimes it just takes a small change. You just have to find it…

Two – It's a profession, as they say.

One – Do you remember his first play?

Two – The one where he talks about his father's death.

One – If I hadn't insisted that it should take place in the Stone Age...

Two – And that the hero should be Belgian.

One – Ah, yes, I'd forgotten. The Belgian accent...

Two – Works every time...

One – Well, I don't think we'll do better than this...

She finally closes the bound document and checks her watch.

Two – Oh dear… I really have to run too. I've got a meeting with this troublemaker I just can't shake… Oh, and what did he call it, by the way?

She looks at the title on the cover.

One *(reading incredulously)* – "Chronicles of a Laborious Life"...

Two – I was sure you wouldn't like it, but I preferred not to say anything to avoid influencing you. I agree, it's a terrible title...

One – "Chronicles of a Laborious Life"... And why not just call it "Laborious Chronicles" while we're at it?

Two – Oh yes, that's... That's shorter.

One – I was joking...

Two – Of course.

One – No, we need something catchier.

Two – A title that makes people want to see the play.

The first one seems to think.

One – Why not "Strip Poker"? That's a catchy title. …Makes you want to see the play – depending on the cast, of course.

Two – Oh yes, that's... It's catchy...

One – But...?

Two – It's the title you already gave to his first play...

One – What play?

Two – The one where he talks about his father's death.

One – Ah...

She thinks again.

One – "Strip Poker 2"...?

The other struggles to fake enthusiasm.

One – No... Something more... Perhaps a first name, since our hero comes from Martinique. Aimé, say?

Two – Why not...?

One – That’s the name of an actor I once had the misfortune to sleep with after promising to make him a star. If I give him the lead role, it might be a way of getting rid of him. He’s dreadful in bed, too...

Two – Ah...

One – Still, Aimé... What an absurd name. What’s your husband called?

Two – Aimé.

One – Ah... Well, "Chronicles of a Laborious Life" isn't so bad after all, right?

Two – You get used to it.

One – When you've repeated it a dozen times. "Chronicles of a Laborious Life"... Alright then, it's settled. So this time you can't say I didn't respect the author's wishes.

Two – You could even say his last wishes.

One – Oh really? Why's that?

Two – Oh, you're not aware? The author committed suicide last night.

One – No...?

Two – I believe he never really got over his father's death.

One – So this is his final play...

Two – Most likely...

One – This will sell brilliantly. A dead playwright is always worth more than a living one who can barely make ends meet.

Two – The misfortune of some...

They start to leave.

One – I hope the heirs won't be too difficult to deal with...?

Two – An old aunt, I think.

One – Did you know hair keeps growing after death?

Two – No...

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
Hold on, Butterfly
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:

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https://comediatheque.net/

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