La Comédiathèque

Not even dead

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Translation by the author

In a hospital bed, a man who has lost his memory following a last-chance operation receives a succession of visits from all the women he has forgotten. Could one of them be the love of his life?

Cast
One man and one woman
(or several men and women)

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An impersonal room, furnished only with a single bed, a bedside table and a chair. A woman in striped pyjamas is asleep in the bed. Her mobile phone rings on the bedside table. She wakes and answers.

Woman – Hello? Yes, speaking... Right... No, no, I'll jump in the car and be there straight away. Thank you for calling...

She puts down the phone, pauses for a moment, then gets up and exits.

Silence. Absurdly dramatic music swells.

The mobile phone rings again. The music cuts out. Her recorded greeting is heard.

Woman *(recorded voice)* – You've reached the theatre *(the name of the theatre where the play is being performed may be given here)*. We're not available at the moment. Please don't leave a message; we won't be leaving one for you either. Remember to switch off your mobile phone, and forget everything else.

Blackout.

Telephone hold music plays.

1. Rise and Walk

Lights up.

An impersonal room containing a single bed, a bedside table and a chair. A man in striped pyjamas is asleep in the bed. A woman enters. She could be his mother: old-fashioned clothes, no make-up, little spring in her step. She approaches the bed.

Woman – It's time... *(When he fails to respond, she raises her voice and shakes him vigorously.)* It's time!

The man wakes with a start and stares at her, bewildered.

Man – Mum? What are you doing here?

Woman – It's time, my boy.

Man – Time? What time?

Woman – I don't know. But it's time.

Man – Time for what, for heaven's sake?

He struggles to sit up, then stops to catch his breath.

Woman – Come on, lazybones! Make an effort! Rise and walk!

He begins to gather his wits.

Man – I feel as if I've heard that somewhere before.

Woman – Unfortunately, I have to repeat it every morning. *(He gives her a puzzled look.)* Are you all right? You look strange...

Man – You think I look strange? Listen, Mum, don't take this the wrong way, but...

Woman – What?

Man – I thought you were dead...

Woman – But... I am.

A pause.

Man – I knew there was something different about you.

Woman *(tight-lipped)* – Oh, really?

Man – No, I mean... you look better, honestly! And Dad?

Woman – He's dead too. Are you quite sure you're not dead yourself?

Man – I don't think so...

Woman – So you're not sure.

Man – I'd imagine you know when you're dead, don't you?

Woman – Oh, I wouldn't be so sure... Are you eating properly, at least?

Man – I don't know... Why?

Woman – If you're eating, you can't be dead.

She rummages in her coat pocket, takes out an apple and offers it to him.

Woman – Here. I brought you this.

He takes the apple warily.

Man – An apple... Like the wicked witch in Snow White...

Woman – Who do you think you are, Snow White?

Man – I'm just being careful.

Woman – Suspicious of your own mother?

Man – You are supposed to be dead, remember?

Woman – So now I'm a witch, am I?

Man – I don't trust still waters. Dead mothers, even less...

She looks around.

Woman – This place isn't exactly cheerful...

He seems to notice his surroundings for the first time.

Man – No... Where are we?

Woman – Looks like a psychiatric hospital.

Man – If I were mad, surely they'd have put me in a straitjacket.

Woman – And your wife? Does she come to see you?

Man – No... Well, I can't quite remember... Am I married?

Woman – What about your friends? You do have friends, don't you?

Man – I don't know. I haven't seen anyone.

Woman – What can I say? It's always been like this... Even as a little boy, you were never very popular...

Man – Thanks... That's cheered me up.

Woman – Even I'm beginning to wonder why I came. You're not even dead!

Man – Sorry to disappoint you. Again.

Woman – You've made a mess of everything in your life. *(She starts to leave, then turns back.)* Even your own death.

She exits. He studies the apple, takes a bite and puts the rest on the bedside table. He chews for a while before swallowing.

Man – So I'm not dead...

Blackout.

2. Recovery Room

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man in striped pyjamas is lying in the bed, with a half-eaten apple on the bedside table. He slowly wakes, sits up and looks around, apparently unsure why he is there. The same woman enters, now looking about twenty years younger, in more youthful clothes, wearing lipstick and with a purposeful manner. She brings a simple breakfast on a tray.

Woman – Morning!

He is clearly struggling to wake up properly.

Man – Morning...

Woman – How are you feeling?

Man – All right... I think.

Woman – Here's your breakfast.

Man – Breakfast in bed? Thanks, but... what's the occasion?

She says nothing, smiles indulgently and sits beside him.

Woman – I can't vouch for the coffee. It's certainly not an espresso.

Man – Never mind, I'll drink it... I feel as though I've got a hangover.

He starts drinking his coffee and eating a piece of crispbread.

Woman – Sorry, I think the crispbread's salt-free...

He smiles and continues chewing.

Man – Do you know what I was thinking?

Woman – No...

Man – I don't think you can really change things.

Woman – Things? You mean...?

Man – Or people.

Woman – Ah, right...

Man – Take my family, for instance... I realised straight away it was never going to work.

Woman – Your family? I am your wife, remember...

Man – No, of course, I wasn't talking about you. You're different... *(A pause.)* Are you absolutely sure we're married?

Woman – Why do you ask?

Man – Well... I'm sleeping in a single bed...

Woman – Oh, I see...

Man – I can't even remember being married. Can you imagine? The doctor says it's normal. I haven't recovered my short-term memory yet.

Woman – We've been married for twenty years...

Man *(distracted)* – Yes, it's odd, isn't it? 'You haven't recovered your short-term memory yet.' That's the last thing I heard, and it's the only thing I can remember... *(A pause.)* Perhaps that's where it comes from...

Woman – What?

Man – My lifelong habit of ruining everything... Just so I won't risk being disappointed... *(He picks up the apple and examines it.)* Once there's a worm in the apple, things aren't going to end well for anyone.

Woman – Except the worm... *(He looks at her in surprise and she immediately backtracks.)* Sorry, I don't know why I said that...

Man – No, you're right... Nobody ever thinks of the worm.

Woman – And you're not an apple.

Man – I don't know. I don't know anything any more.

Woman – Have you taken your medication?

Man – What medication?

Woman – I'll fetch you a glass of water.

She exits. He takes another bite of the apple. She returns with a glass of water and some tablets. Something about her has changed: an item of clothing or an accessory, perhaps her hairstyle or a wig. Nothing outrageous, but conspicuous and slightly unsettling. He appears not to notice. She offers him the water as if nothing were different.

Man – Thank you.

He takes the tablets she offers him and swallows them. She stares at him.

Man – What is it? What's wrong with me?

Woman – I have to tell you something.

Man – All right.

Woman – It's not easy.

Man – You're frightening me...

Woman – It's not about you. Well, it is, but...

Man – Right...

Woman – The thing is... I'm not exactly... who you think I am.

Man – What do you mean? How could I? I don't even know who I am.

Woman – Well, you do think I'm your wife.

Man – You mean... you're cheating on me?

Woman – No, not in that sense. Although...

Man – Although what?

Woman – I'm not cheating on you... but I have deceived you.

Man – When? With whom?

Woman – Not with another man, I can promise you that.

Man – I wasn't worried.

Woman – No, I mean I deceived you by not telling you the truth. I've lied to you.

Man – About what?

Woman – Everything. All along. The truth is, I'm not quite a woman...

Man – I've been married to a man all this time and never noticed?

Woman – I'm not a man either.

Man – Right... Somewhere in between, then.

Woman – Neither, actually.

Man – Well... I suppose that explains why we never had children.

Woman – Yes... Among other things...

Man – There's more?

Woman – I'm not from here.

Man – Here? Where exactly are we?

Woman – I come from a completely different world.

Man – You're a witch... You're Samantha and I'm Darrin.

Woman – Witches don't exist. Everyone knows that.

Man – So you're not a witch either.

Woman – Do you remember my mother?

Man – No.

Woman – She gave birth to me after a visit from an extraterrestrial.

Silence. He stares at her, trying to think of a response.

Man – I feel as if I've heard that story somewhere before.

Woman – In church, perhaps. The Virgin Mary's pregnancy.

Man – Yes... Or perhaps it's the medication...

Blackout.

3. Doctor Ionesco

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The same room, but a few details now reveal it to be a hospital room: a medical chart at the foot of the bed, for example, and an IV stand beside the bedside table. The same man wakes in the same bed. The same woman enters, this time wearing a doctor's white coat.

Woman – Well then, my dear sir? How are we feeling today?

Man – All right... I suppose... But what are you doing in my room?

Woman – Ah... The very fact that you're asking suggests you still haven't quite recovered your short-term memory.

Man – I don't remember anything... Except that you've already told me that.

Woman – Don't worry. It's very common after this sort of operation. Once you start interfering with the brain...

Man – My brain? I see...

Woman – Well, if you can still see, that's something. Now, we have to be honest. Your condition... is giving us serious cause for concern.

Man – You mean it's a cause for concern for me, presumably?

Woman – I'd love to bring you good news, but what can I say? I'm not God Almighty.

Man – Which is good news in itself, as far as I'm concerned.

Woman – You think so?

Man – Waking up after brain surgery to find God Almighty at your bedside...

Woman – Of course... Well, our first test results aren't terribly encouraging... for you.

Man – I hear you.

Woman – Well, if you can still hear, that's something too.

Man – So you're saying... it's serious.

Woman – Good heavens... Not necessarily...

Man – What do you mean?

Woman – The serious thing is... we have absolutely no idea what's wrong with you.

Man – Ah... And I imagine that's serious... for you.

Woman – If we don't know what's wrong, we don't know how to treat it. In short, we don't know what to do. And when we don't know what to do, we don't know what to say. Quite frankly, my dear sir, I don't know what to say to you.

Man – Listen, Doctor... May I call you Doctor?

Woman – I qualified in medicine in Romania... *(Delighted.)* Why, of course! Please do call me Doctor.

Man – I know you're very concerned about me, but I'm rather more worried about my wife's mental health.

Woman – Your wife? Goodness me...

Man – I know it sounds incredible, but... my wife thinks she's a Martian.

Woman – Well, well...

Man – You don't seem surprised.

Woman – Oh, I am, of course. It's just... To tell you the truth... *(She consults a file.)* I didn't know you were married. There's certainly no mention of it in your medical records.

Man – Perhaps they didn't consider it a serious enough condition to put on file.

She gives a rather forced laugh.

Woman – At least you've got your sense of humour back. That's a good sign, isn't it? Do you know Ionesco?

Man – Not personally.

Woman – He was Romanian, like me. And I have the honour of sharing his surname. According to my mother, we're distantly related.

Man – Really?

Woman *(confidentially)* – Between you and me, I've always thought Romanians were better suited to the theatre of the absurd than to brain surgery.

Man – Thank you, Doctor Ionesco. Just what a patient wants to hear from the surgeon who operated on his brain...

Woman – You're very welcome. That's what I'm here for. If you have any other questions, please ask.

Man – And... can you do anything for my wife?

Woman – Your wife? Good heavens... First, we'd have to establish that you actually have a wife.

Man – Yes, of course.

Woman – And then we'd have to establish that she isn't really an extraterrestrial.

Man – What do you mean?

Woman – You must admit, if your supposed wife genuinely comes from Mars, we can hardly call her mad for saying so.

Man – When you put it like that...

Woman – That's what they teach us in medical school in Romania, anyway.

He studies her as though seeing her for the first time.

Man – You know what's extraordinary, Doctor Ionesco...?

Woman – What?

Man – You look exactly like my wife. Or you would, if I were married.

Woman – And yet I can assure you I'm not from Mars.

Man – No. You're from Romania. And... you really were the one who operated on me, weren't you?

Woman – Unfortunately for you, yes... Perhaps a doctor from another part of the galaxy could have saved you.

Man – Do you think so?

Woman – They say those civilisations are far more advanced than ours. Their doctors are probably better trained than a mere junior surgeon who studied in Bucharest...

Man – Well, I wouldn't...

Woman – You're right. Once we start speculating at that level, can we still call it a reasonable assumption? I'll leave you to rest. I'll come back a little later.

Man – Could I ask one more favour?

Woman – As long as you don't ask me to save your life...

Man – If you meet my wife, please tell her I'm not married.

Woman – Certainly.

Man – Thank you.

She is about to leave, but turns back.

Woman – May I ask you something too?

Man – Provided you don't ask me my name.

Woman – Could you call me Doctor just one more time?

Man – Thank you, Doctor Ionesco. Goodbye, Doctor.

Blackout.

4. Last Rites

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man sits up in bed, staring into space. The same woman enters dressed as a priest.

Woman – Good morning, my son.

Man *(barely surprised)* – Morning, Dad...

Woman – I'm the chaplain at this hospital.

Man – Good morning, Father.

Woman – I came as soon as you called.

Man – Are you absolutely sure I called you?

Woman – Someone asked me to see you. She had a slight Romanian accent.

Man – Ah, yes... My surgeon...

Woman – I gathered it was rather urgent. But if you don't feel ready, I can come back later.

Man – No, no, please. We might as well get it over with. Just in case. I don't know how long it's valid for, though...

Woman – Valid?

Man – The last rites. If you don't die straight away, how long do they last? Three months, perhaps? Like a medical certificate.

Woman – I must confess... I've never been asked that before. And, as far as I know, the situation has never arisen in my experience...

Man – You mean none of your flock has ever survived after you administered the last rites?

Woman – Well... no, as a matter of fact...

Man – And are you absolutely sure I'm Catholic?

Woman – Goodness... I've never thought of demanding a baptism certificate under the circumstances. I can't imagine a dying man lying about his religion just to secure the last rites at the last minute. Aren't you sure you're Catholic, my son?

Man – I don't remember being Jewish or Muslim either. And since I'm not circumcised... I am not circumcised, am I?

Woman – Good Lord...

Man – Sorry to trouble you with so many questions. You see, I haven't had much practice at this. It's my first last rites...

Woman – Yes, I rather assumed so... Would you at least like to make a confession, my son?

Man – I don't know... Is it compulsory?

Woman – Strongly recommended, shall we say. For the salvation of your soul.

Man – Right... After all, what have I got to lose?

Woman – I'm listening, my son.

He thinks for a moment, then looks at her as if noticing her for the first time.

Man – I have to admit...

Woman – Yes?

Man – It's rather awkward.

Woman – Why is that, my son?

Man – You look so much like my wife.

Woman – I see...

Man – You can understand that for a married man, having his confessor look just like his wife...

Woman – Rest assured, my son. Even if I were your wife, I'd be bound by the seal of confession.

Man – Right... But I'm not sure where to begin.

Woman – Why not start at the end?

Man – Confession's rather difficult when you've lost your memory, you know...

Woman – Well, do you at least feel guilty, my son? That would be a start.

Man – I'm not sure... Can you still be guilty if you can't even remember what you've done?

Woman – You really don't remember anything?

Man – I can't even remember where I parked the car.

Woman – As you're unable to confess your sins, I'll give you absolution anyway. The benefit of the doubt, as it were.

Man – Thank you for trusting me, Father. I'll try not to let you down.

Woman – But don't forget to put matters right as soon as you're able.

Man – I promise. Cross my heart and hope to die... On second thoughts, perhaps not.

She makes the sign of the cross over him.

Woman – In the name of the Father, the Mother and the Son.

Man – Amen.

Blackout.

5. The Phoenix

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man gradually regains consciousness in bed. The same woman enters dressed like a business executive, carrying a laptop in a briefcase.

Woman – Good morning, my dear sir!

Man – Good morning...

Woman – One moment, if you'll excuse me. This won't take long.

Man – By all means...

She takes the laptop from her briefcase, switches it on and sets it on the bedside table so that he can see the screen.

Woman – Do you remember the Wi-Fi password?

Man – I can't even remember my name.

Woman – Never mind. We can manage without it. *(Clearing her throat.)* My dear sir, I wanted to see you without delay because I have some very good news.

Man – A new medicine? A miracle cure? Something that might save my life?

Woman – You've taken the words right out of my mouth, sir. The new financial products I have to offer could change your life.

Man – So you're not a doctor, then.

Woman – I'm your financial adviser. You do have an account with General Credit Bank, don't you?

Man – Yes... possibly.

Woman – And I can assure you, you're one of our most valued customers.

Man – That's good. I'm not even sure I'm a very good Catholic.

Woman – Don't worry, that's not a requirement for trading on the stock market. As one of our preferred clients, you're among the first to be offered our exceptional new investment opportunities, with absolutely outstanding returns.

Man – Really...

Woman – Look at this chart. *(She shows him a graph.)* Our new equity fund, Phoenix, has gained twenty-seven per cent in just six months.

Man – Phoenix? Very uplifting. Why the name?

Woman – Well, the previous year, I'm afraid, it lost seventy-three per cent of its market value. It's a risky investment, reserved for the boldest investors. But it always rises from the ashes!

Man – I'm not sure I can say the same.

Woman – Come now, I can see you're a fighter. Over the long term, the stock market always rewards those who hold on.

Man – The long term... Did I mention I've just received the last rites?

Woman – I was coming to that, sir. I won't pretend you have all the time in the world to decide. This is a unique opportunity, and places are limited. We can only accommodate clients who act quickly.

Man – I'm not sure I'm reacting to anything these days. Not even the treatment. Frankly, I'm beginning to wonder whether I'm already dead.

She opens her briefcase and produces a brochure, offering it with a professional smile.

Woman – Not to worry. We also offer a full range of life insurance and funeral cover.

Man *(taking the brochure)* – Thank you...

Woman – I'll leave you to think it over, sir. We wouldn't dream of putting you under pressure. We're here to advise you, first and foremost.

Man – Yes, I'll think about it.

Woman – I must go. I have other potential investors to see in this establishment. By the way, what is it exactly? Some sort of retirement home?

Man – A palliative care unit.

Woman – Exactly. Well, I hope to see you again very soon. But do think quickly, sir. In your particular circumstances, time is of the essence... and it would be a shame to miss out.

Blackout.

6. A Happy Event

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

Someone lies in the hospital bed, their face hidden. A man enters wearing old-fashioned everyday clothes and carrying a bouquet of flowers (he is apparently the father of the extraterrestrial woman seen earlier). Finding the woman asleep, he puts the flowers on the bedside table and goes out again. The woman wakes, sits up and notices the bouquet. The man returns with a vase of water.

Man – I didn't want to wake you...

Woman *(slightly confused)* – Thanks for the flowers.

He puts the flowers in the vase and sets it on the bedside table.

Man – How are you feeling?

Woman – I slept badly... I had this nightmare where you were the one in hospital and I was coming to visit you.

Man – But you're not ill.

She looks surprised.

Woman – Then what am I doing in a hospital bed?

Man – Darling! You're in the maternity ward. You've just given birth...

Woman – Oh, yes...

Man – You must still be feeling the effects of the anaesthetic.

Woman – Anaesthetic?

Man – Things got a little complicated. I'll explain later. But don't worry. Everything's going to be all right now.

Woman – And the baby?

Man – It's a girl.

Woman – A girl? That's wonderful...

Man – Well, when I say a girl...

Woman – Can I see her?

Man – As I said, things got rather complicated. I'll explain...

Woman – She didn't survive the birth, is that it?

Man – No, she's alive. Don't worry. Although... perhaps I shouldn't say 'don't worry'.

Woman – What? What's wrong? Was she injured during the birth? Will there be lasting damage?

Man – No... She... Apparently there won't be any lasting damage. It's just that...

Woman – She has Down syndrome!

Man – No, nothing like that. That's not the problem...

Woman – Then what is the problem? Is she normal or not?

Man – Yes... and no.

Woman – What do you mean, yes and no? Either a baby is normal or she isn't.

Man – Let's say she's perfectly normal... for an extraterrestrial.

A pause.

Woman – I see...

Man – What do you mean, you see? You don't seem surprised.

Woman – I am, of course, but... It's coming back to me now.

Man – Coming back? What's coming back? *(Realising something.)* Are you telling me you've been unfaithful to me with an alien, and it's only just occurred to you?

Woman – It's nothing like what you think, I promise.

Man – Oh, really?

Woman – Having a baby doesn't always require an ordinary mother and father. Think of the baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary, for example.

Man – The Virgin Mary? Are you having a laugh? My name isn't Joseph, and I know an unfaithful wife when I see one.

Woman – It's a bit more complicated than that...

Man – My wife has cheated on me with an extraterrestrial. She's given birth to an alien when I was supposed to be the father! I find it hard to imagine anything more complicated!

Woman – And you're certain she's normal...?

Man – What do you mean, normal? She looks like E.T.!

Woman – I'm just wondering how a gynaecologist can tell whether an alien baby is normal when he doesn't even know what planet the father comes from.

Man *(deflated)* – You've got a point... Especially when the gynaecologist comes from Romania. At least we know that much for certain.

Blackout.

7. Invisible Ink

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man is back in the bed, staring into space. The same woman enters, rather formally dressed and carrying a briefcase.

Woman – Good morning, sir. Sorry I'm a little late. A minor setback.

Man – Do we know each other?

Woman – Forgive me, I forgot. We've never met. I'm Ms Colombin, your notary.

Man – Colombin?

Woman – Does the name mean anything to you?

Man – Let me think... Colombin, Columbine, Colombian, columbarium... Colombin... No. All I know is that I'm in deep shit.

She opens her briefcase and takes out some papers.

Woman – As it happens, that's why I'm here. I've prepared the documents you requested, as agreed.

Man – Oh, have you?

Woman – Your will. Do you remember?

Man – No.

Woman – Well, it's always wise to put your affairs in order. Just in case...

Man – A priest told me much the same thing not long ago.

Woman – None of us lives forever, do we? On my way here I had a little collision. Some dreadful driver. It could have been much worse. That's why I'm late.

Man – So that's why the notary arrived after the priest. I thought it was an odd order of events...

Woman – I had to fill out the accident report. The idiot wouldn't admit he was at fault. And he was a priest, as it happens... Proof that even a man of faith can act in bad faith.

Man – A priest who, strangely enough, looked remarkably like my wife, I suppose.

Woman – I won't keep you long. I'm running terribly late myself. *(She hands him a sheaf of papers and a pen.)* Here. If you could just initial each page and sign at the end. No need to read every word, of course.

He hesitates before taking the documents and pen.

Man – Well, I suppose I haven't much choice. I feel as though I'm signing my own death warrant.

He tries to sign, but stops after several unsuccessful attempts.

Woman – Is something wrong?

Man – Your pen doesn't work.

Woman – Let me see... *(She bends over the document.)* Oh, of course... I forgot to mention it. It's invisible ink.

Man – Invisible ink?

Woman – Lemon juice, to be precise.

Man – Right...

Woman – Go ahead, sign. *(While he initials and signs.)* You see, notaries aren't always welcome in palliative care units.

Man – How peculiar.

Woman – Yet they even bring clowns in, I'm told. Presumably to shorten the patients' suffering by making them die laughing. Personally, I've always found clowns terribly sad. Haven't you?

Man – A notary, perhaps...

Woman – Circuses in general. So gloomy. I've always thought they smelled of death. Funfairs too, of course.

Man – You were telling me about lemon juice, I think.

Woman – Well, some families are more suspicious than others. They worry we'll make a dying relative sign all sorts of things, empty the poor person's bank account and deprive the family of its inheritance.

Man – So if you meet one of my relatives on your way out, you can show them my will and say, 'Look, he hasn't signed a thing.'

Woman – Exactly.

Man – Then when you get back to your office, you warm the paper over a candle until the writing appears. I used to do that when I was a child.

Woman – We were all children once, weren't we?

Man – Only notaries seem to have kept their childish streak...

Woman – I'd better go. I've got other dying people to see before this evening.

Man – Just out of curiosity... What does my will actually say, in broad terms?

Woman – You're leaving everything to a foundation dedicated to establishing contact with extraterrestrial civilisations.

Man – Well, if that helps me get back in touch with my wife...

Blackout.

8. Settling the Account

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man wakes in bed. The same woman returns in a doctor's white coat.

Woman – Good morning, sir.

Man – Good morning, Doctor.

Woman – I won't ask how you are. It's the sort of question you ask automatically, before realising you really shouldn't have.

Man – You haven't happened to see a notary leaving this room with a will signed in invisible ink, have you?

Woman – My dear sir, I think at this stage... I mean, at this terminal stage of your illness... there's no point hiding from the truth, is there?

Man – So you still haven't got any good news for me?

Woman – You still owe us a considerable sum of money, so I owe you at least the truth. It was what we call a last-chance operation. Unfortunately, it didn't work. I'm truly sorry.

Man – I'm not surprised. I've never had much luck...

Woman – You mustn't have regrets. In medical jargon, a 'last-chance operation' is an operation with no chance whatsoever of succeeding.

Man – I see.

Woman – It's just something we say to give the family, and the patient, a little hope while we wait for the inevitable.

Man – Yes, I think I've grasped the general idea...

Woman – How many people do you know who survived a last-chance operation?

Man – None, I must admit...

Woman – There you are. And surely they can't all have been that unlucky...

Man – So I'm going to die.

Woman – I wouldn't put it quite so bluntly, but... yes, my dear sir, it's time to take stock of your life and settle your accounts with the world. Starting with the company that owns the controlling interest in this hospital.

Man – Thank you for your candour, Doctor Ionesco.

Woman – Unfortunately, I'm going to have to ask you to stop calling me Doctor.

Man – Oh?

Woman – After reviewing my qualifications and the mortality rate in my surgical department, the hospital management decided it would be better to transfer me to Accounts.

Man – I see. But then... what exactly are you doing here?

Woman – Well... When I said 'settle your accounts', it wasn't a metaphor. I've come with your bill, my dear sir. You may be leaving us, but you didn't think we'd let you go without paying, did you? And your medical insurance is hardly adequate... Didn't anyone advise you to take out additional cover?

Man – And what if I can't afford to pay?

Woman – That could seriously affect the salvation of your soul. Our Debt Recovery Department is remarkably effective, you know.

Man – More effective than your Surgery Department, certainly.

Woman – Let's just say that the Romanian staff at this hospital have proved far more efficient at collecting debts than at performing brain surgery. And our shareholders now have connections in very high places.

Man – You mean... up there?

Woman – Well, the sovereign wealth funds that run our lives were already controlled by the living dead. First they bought retirement homes, hospitals, churches and cemeteries. Quite logically, they eventually acquired shares in Heaven and Hell as well.

Man – And so?

Woman – So the choice is yours... But I should warn you: Heaven takes a very dim view of people who don't pay their bills.

Blackout.

9. A Real Fake

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man lies in the bed. The same woman enters, dressed all in black and carrying a scythe.

Woman – Well, my dear sir? Ready for the final departure? I don't see your little suitcase. You won't need it where you're going, of course, but I'm told it gives people comfort...

Man – Is that a real scythe?

Woman – This? Oh, goodness no. It's a fake. Plastic. Look!

She bends the blade with her hand.

Man – Right.

Woman – A real scythe! Someone might get hurt.

Man – Especially in a hospital.

Woman – The scythe's only a symbol. Like a broom for a witch or a crozier for a bishop. It makes us instantly recognisable.

Man – I recognised you straight away.

Woman – Saves us having to introduce ourselves. Can you imagine? 'Hello, I'm Death. I've come to cut short what little time you have left, now that the hospital accountant has already cut through your savings.'

Man – Well, at least you've got a sense of humour...

Woman – You won't be bored with us, I promise. So, are you ready?

Man – Good Lord... As ready as anyone can be. What exactly am I supposed to do?

Woman – Nothing. All I have to do is turn out the light...

Man – Will you be accompanying me on this last journey?

Woman – Oh no, don't worry. I'm just the messenger, so to speak. The postwoman, if you prefer. I've come with a registered letter, signature required. After that...

Man – I see... Could you give me another minute?

Woman – If you want one last trip to the toilet, now's the time. You won't have the necessary equipment afterwards. Believe me, there comes an age when that isn't entirely bad news.

Blackout.

10. The Final Departure

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The man gets up from the bed with a suitcase in his hand. The same woman enters wearing something resembling an alien spacesuit.

Woman – Hello, darling.

Man – But I don't understand... What happened to the...?

Woman – The Grim Reaper? I sent her off to the vending machine for two coffees. I never thought getting rid of her would be quite so easy. But we haven't a moment to lose.

Man – So it was true? I really am married?

Woman – As true as I'm an extraterrestrial.

Man – But... how is that possible?

Woman – It's a rather complicated story. Actually, it all started with my mother... I'll tell you on the way.

Man – On the way where?

Woman – I'm taking you back to my home planet.

Man – And then what happens?

Woman – Believe me, our hospitals are far better than this one.

Man – And I suppose there's no danger of running into a Romanian junior doctor.

Woman – None whatsoever.

He looks around.

Man – And we're never coming back here?

Woman – Don't tell me you'll miss the place.

Man – I was beginning to get used to it.

Woman – If you'd rather wait for the Grim Reaper to come back from the psychiatric ward with her coffee flask and plastic scythe... After all, you've had the last rites. You could take your chances with the priest.

Man – I don't know... Pascal's wager. I've never had much luck with bets. In fact, I've never had much luck with anything. I even lost my last chance with that operation. I'm hardly going to gamble on a miracle now.

Woman – So you'd rather put your faith in an alien?

Man – If she looks like my wife, why not? So we really are leaving for good...

Woman – We may come back one day. Just not yet.

Man – You mean in a very long time?

Woman – Time... That's the first thing you'll have to forget. Now we really must go. I can see her getting impatient over there, with her genuine plastic scythe...

Man – She'll be disappointed. I only told her I needed the toilet...

Woman – She believes that, after death, people go straight to Heaven with their guardian angel. We didn't want to upset her.

Man – And in my case she's not entirely wrong. It's just that my guardian angel is a Martian.

Woman – Which is why I'd rather be gone before she gets back. God is like Santa Claus: the day you finally see him is the day you stop believing. *(She holds out her hand.)* Shall we?

Man *(hesitant)* – Will my mother be there too?

Woman – I told you... It's not Heaven... Even the Virgin Mary will be there.

Man – I never thought I'd hear that. I can't help wondering if I've gone mad.

Woman – Life is one long course of therapy, and you don't always come out cured.

Man – It's also one long illness, and no one gets out alive. So what's this operation going to involve?

Woman – A brain transplant.

Man – Oh... I'd better make a backup, then.

Woman – We'll give you a Martian brain. Unfortunately, we won't be able to retrieve the data currently stored in your memory.

Man – Well... I couldn't remember much anyway. And not all my memories were happy ones. Come to think of it, perhaps it doesn't matter. No regrets. Not one. A fresh start...

Woman – That reminds me of a song...

Man – With you... I'd go to the ends of the earth... If you asked me to...

She takes his hand.

Woman – Then let's go...

They exit.

Blackout.

Telephone hold music plays.

Lights up.

The room is empty. No one is in the bed. A doctor enters with a nurse. Both are wearing white coats.

Woman – Ah, this one's empty now...

Man – No. The fellow left us yesterday. Doctor Ionesco operated on him...

Woman – Her last operation...

Man – And her last victim...

Woman – Another bed available for the next patient.

Man – Meanwhile, we've already had three babies born in the maternity ward this morning.

Woman – Some leave, others arrive... The great cycle of life.

They start to leave.

Man – Do you know what became of him?

Woman – He died, didn't he?

Man – I meant Ionesco.

Woman – Oh... She left us too. I believe she's working in theatre now.

Man – Better than being dead.

Woman – Yes... Perhaps...

Blackout.

Telephone hold music plays.

Voice-over – Please hold. God will take your call shortly...

The music resumes.

Voice-over – Please hold. Mars will take your call shortly...

The music resumes.

Voice-over – Please hold. Ionesco will take your call shortly...

The music resumes.

An engaged tone sounds, or the call is disconnected.

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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