La Comédiathèque



Neighbours' Day

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Alex has inherited a splendid apartment in an elegant part of Paris from a great-aunt he never knew existed. He comes to inspect it with his partner Clara. But family secrets are like buried bodies: sooner or later, they always come back to the surface...

14 characters
Alex, a literary editor
Clara, an English teacher
Mrs Sanchez, the caretaker
Mrs Martin, the building manager
Dr Bernard, a doctor
Mr Petit, a lawyer
Sam, a sex worker or a character in drag
Colonel Leroy, a cavalry officer
Father Dessaint, a defrocked priest
Baroness de la Cour
Dr Zebra, a psychoanalyst
Angela, a painter
Mr Crampon, an insurance broker
Mrs Crampon, his wife

Suggested cast: 5 men and 9 women
As several roles may be played by either a man or a woman,
the gender distribution is very flexible:
3M/11F, 4M/10F, 5M/9F, 6M/8F, 7M/7F, 8M/6F, 9M/5F...

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A living room with a broad window overlooking the rooftops of Paris, as we imagine it. The window faces the audience. Stage left opens onto a terrace; stage right leads to a hallway and the front door. The furniture is old-fashioned, the decoration verging on kitsch. Upstage hangs an enormous portrait of a young officer from before the Second World War, bearing a faint resemblance to Marshal Pétain, who later headed the French regime under Nazi occupation.

Alex *(offstage)* – Just a second. I've got to disarm the alarm. If I don't do it within thirty seconds, we'll wake the whole building and the police will think we're burglars... Shit, what's the code again? Oh, yes. Fourteen-eighteen...

Clara appears in the doorway. She takes in the room with a mixture of admiration and horror.

Clara – Wow!

She steps inside. Alex follows her.

Alex – I warned you this place needed a little redecorating...

Clara – You sound like an estate agent. You're the owner, remember?

Alex – I still can't quite believe it... But wait till you see this.

He takes her to the window to admire the view. This time, she is genuinely impressed.

Clara – Wow!

Alex – From the terrace, if you lean out a little, you can even see the Eiffel Tower.

Clara – That'll be a change. From our old place, without even leaning out, we can see the local cemetery.

Alex puts his arms around her.

Alex – Well? Ready to spend our first night together in our new home?

Clara – It's very tempting... But I'd rather see your great-grandmother's bed before giving you a definite answer.

Alex – She wasn't my great-grandmother. She was my great-aunt. Germaine.

Clara – Germaine? Was she German?

Alex – No, Germaine was her first name. She was my grandmother's older sister.

Clara – Your father's mother?

Alex – My mother's. At least, that's what I've been told...

Clara wanders around the room.

Clara – And you never met her?

Alex – I didn't even know my grandmother had a sister.

Clara – That's incredible...

Alex – What is?

Clara – That your parents never mentioned this Aunt Germaine.

Alex – Yeah...

Clara – And now you've inherited her apartment.

Alex – She had no children, apparently. And since my parents are dead too, the lawyer says I'm her only heir.

Clara – It's sad, though. Just think: all those years she lived here, two stops on the Metro from your publishing house, and you only discovered she existed when she died.

Alex – Not even that. I only heard from the lawyer after the funeral was over.

Clara picks up a framed photograph from a little table.

Clara – Is this her?

Alex – I suppose so.

Clara – She was beautiful... when she was young.

Alex – Yeah.

Clara – Is that all you have to say?

Alex – About what?

Clara – She's gone. You'll never get to know her. All you've got left is a photograph...

Alex – And the apartment.

Clara – Doesn't it bother you that Aunt Germaine is dead?

Alex – Of course it does. It certainly means something to me.

Clara – In what way?

Alex – To tell you the truth, it feels like winning the lottery.

Clara puts the photograph down.

Clara – Well, I won't miss our cramped little flat in the suburbs.

Alex – Think of it! No more commuter train. I can walk to work!

Clara – And I can cycle. All I have to do is cross the Seine to get to school.

Alex – No rent. The heart of Paris. A top-floor apartment with a terrace and a lift, in one of those grand old Parisian buildings.

Clara – There you go, sounding like an estate agent again.

Alex – There's even a parking space!

Clara – We don't have a car.

Alex – Are you joking? Do you know what a parking space rents for around here?

Clara – No. How much?

Alex – I don't know exactly, but probably half my salary.

Clara – Then rent it out and work part-time. You could finally write your first novel. You can't spend your whole life publishing other people's books.

Alex – I'd have to find a story first...

Clara – You could tell the story of your mysterious grandmother.

Alex – Great-aunt.

Clara – A woman who lived to almost a hundred. She'd have been in her twenties during the war. There must be a novel in that.

Clara glances around the room again.

Alex – There's certainly an atmosphere...

Clara – Oppressive, I'd call it. It feels as if Germaine's ghost is still hanging around.

Alex – Perhaps we ought to have the place exorcised before we move in.

Clara – You think?

Alex – First we'll get rid of all this junk and repaint the walls.

Clara – You have to admit, it's rather gloomy.

Alex returns to the window.

Alex – Maybe, but look at that view! All those rooftops stretching away as far as you can see.

Clara – And behind every window, people with their own stories. Their own destinies.

Alex – It's almost like a novel.

Clara – Paris...

Alex – The most beautiful city in the world.

Clara – And the most romantic.

Alex – Thousands of flats like this. Millions of people. Billions of stories being written.

Clara – Just imagine. Right now, someone is proposing marriage.

Alex – Someone else is having a terrible row with their partner.

Clara – Babies are being born.

Alex – And old people are kicking the bucket, like Aunt Germaine.

Clara – People are washing the dishes.

Alex – And people are making love...

They begin to embrace, but the doorbell rings.

Clara – Who on earth could that be?

Alex – No idea. I don't know a soul in this building.

Clara – Aunt Germaine's ghost?

Alex – I'll see.

Clara – Shall I come with you?

Alex – I'll be fine. If I'm not back in five minutes, call an exorcist.

Alex exits. Clara studies the portrait with growing curiosity.

Alex *(offstage)* – Oh, no... Not at all... Please, do come in.

Alex returns with Mrs Martin.

Martin – I hope I'm not disturbing you. Mrs Sanchez, the caretaker, said she'd seen you going upstairs with a lady. *(Noticing Clara)* Although I don't know whether she's your wife... Good afternoon, miss.

Clara – Good afternoon.

Alex – Clara, this is Mrs Martin. She's a neighbour and she manages the building.

Martin *(solemnly)* – My dear sir, on behalf of every apartment owner in this building, whom I have the honour to represent, may I offer you our heartfelt condolences.

Alex – Thank you, but really...

Martin – Your aunt was an extraordinary woman. Strong-willed, certainly, but quite charming. Everyone here was very fond of Germaine.

Alex – I'm delighted to hear that. Really.

Martin – She was much more than a neighbour to us. We helped each other out. We did her shopping, dealt with paperwork when she needed us...

Clara – Really?

Martin – We did everything we could to stop her feeling lonely. As you know, she hardly ever had visitors. We showered her with affection. And she certainly returned the favour.

Alex – That's... That's wonderful.

Martin – For Germaine, we were like a family. I didn't even know she had another family, come to think of it. She never spoke of one.

Alex – Well, you see, I hardly knew Aunt Germaine myself.

Martin – Indeed... I don't remember seeing you at the funeral, either.

Alex – The truth is, I...

Clara, irritated by the interrogation, cuts in.

Clara – I'm sure you haven't come merely to chat, and we wouldn't dream of keeping you. Is there perhaps something you need to borrow? A corkscrew, some salt, a box of matches...?

Alex – A nutcracker, perhaps?

Martin – You're not so far off with the corkscrew, actually... It's a little awkward, given the circumstances.

Clara – Go on.

Martin *(clearing her throat)* – Excuse me. I've got a frog in my throat.

Alex – Can I get you something to drink?

Clara gives Alex a reproachful look.

Clara – I'm not sure we've got anything to offer.

Martin – A glass of water would be lovely, thank you.

Clara – I don't even know where the fridge is.

Martin – Don't trouble yourself. Tap water's perfectly fine. Excellent in this neighbourhood. Why lug heavy bottles upstairs when you live on the top floor, even with a lift? *(Alex and Clara wait for her to come to the point.)* Kitchen, second door on the left. Glasses in the cupboard above the sink.

Clara goes out, rather put out.

Martin – Well, today's the annual neighbours' party. And ever since it started, your aunt always insisted we hold it in her flat.

Alex – Did she now?

Martin – A tradition, really. The terrace, the view across Paris... You can see why.

Alex – Of course.

Martin – It is the finest apartment in the building. And since Germaine lived alone, the party gave her a little company.

Alex – Sadly, she's dead now.

Martin – Naturally. But I'm sure she would have loved to see us all gathered here one last time tonight.

Alex – The thing is... We weren't expecting...

Martin – Oh, don't worry. We'll take care of everything. As always. I mean, as we did for Germaine.

Clara returns with a glass of water and hands it to Mrs Martin.

Martin – Thank you very much.

Clara – You're welcome.

Mrs Martin puts the glass down without drinking it.

Martin – As I was saying to your husband...

Clara – We're not married. Yet. If that's what you wanted to know.

Alex steps in to ease the tension.

Alex – Mrs Martin has invited us to the neighbours' party.

Clara – How very kind. *(Surprised)* When exactly?

Martin – Why, today!

Alex – Except... She means we're hosting it here.

Clara – Here? In our apartment? You mean right here?

Martin – Think of it as a sort of... leaving party.

Alex – But we've only just arrived.

Martin – A farewell party, I mean. For Germaine. Since you weren't able to attend her funeral...

Alex – Of course...

Martin – Well, if you agree, that's settled. I really don't know how to thank you.

Caught off guard, Alex and Clara exchange an embarrassed look.

Alex – Oh, please. Don't mention it.

Martin – So you are planning to move into this apartment, are you?

Alex – Er... Yes. Well...

Martin – Perfect! You'll meet all your new neighbours. Two birds with one stone.

Alex – Yes, why not...

Martin – I must be off. Still a few preparations to make... For our little gathering. See you later?

Alex – See you later.

Alex starts to follow her.

Alex – Let me show you out.

Martin – No need. I know the way.

Alex – Right.

Mrs Martin leaves. Alex and Clara stare at each other.

Alex – I rather think she forced our hand, don't you?

Clara – You think? You didn't exactly put up a fight.

Alex – You left me alone with her!

Clara – You sent me to the kitchen for a glass of water! Which she didn't even drink.

Alex – We haven't moved in yet. We can't start by falling out with the whole building.

Clara – There's a difference between being friendly and letting the entire building take over on our first day.

Alex – You're right. She talked us into that party before I could blink.

Clara – And the neighbours' party is normally held in summer, not December.

Alex – Really?

Clara – I thought you knew!

Alex – How would I know?

Clara – Everyone knows you don't hold a summer neighbours' party at the end of December. The end of December is Christmas! You have heard of Christmas, haven't you?

Alex – Why on earth are they holding it in December, then?

Clara – Another tradition, I suppose. Like holding it in our apartment. This is going well...

Alex – Look on the bright side. We can meet all our neighbours at once.

Clara – There's no hurry. We've barely arrived.

Alex – Well, we're co-owners now. That comes with certain obligations.

Clara – You're the co-owner.

Alex – We will have to deal with them over building matters. Mrs Martin is in charge. I couldn't just throw her out.

Clara – Mrs Martin... She certainly knows how to get her own way.

Alex – At least it saves us having to throw a housewarming party. She says they're doing everything.

Clara – They do seem to have a talent for doing everything, especially things that aren't their business. I've got a bad feeling about this building.

Alex – We'll see. If they're unpleasant, we won't invite them again.

Clara – They invited themselves!

Alex *(putting his arms around her)* – Come on. Let's not fight over it.

Clara – You're right. The important thing is that we're finally home.

Alex – Shall we finish looking round?

Clara *(pointing to the portrait)* – Who's that? Your great-uncle? Germaine's husband?

Alex – Not a clue.

They both examine the portrait.

Clara – Doesn't he look a bit like Marshal Pétain? With that moustache...

Alex – All soldiers looked alike then. Moustaches were fashionable. But he seems rather young, doesn't he?

Clara – Even Pétain was young once.

Alex – True. It's hard to imagine that dictators weren't born with moustaches. Pétain was once a clean-shaven young man, Stalin an awkward teenager and Hitler a chubby baby.

Clara – It can't be a masterpiece, anyway. Not that you'd think so from that enormous frame.

Alex – Shame. It could have paid the inheritance tax.

Clara – Inheritance tax?

Alex – This apartment isn't exactly free. With a great-aunt, inheritance tax can be enormous. And Germaine didn't leave any money in the bank to pay it.

Clara – How huge?

Alex – The lawyer hasn't worked it out yet. If necessary, I'll get a loan. Better than paying rent.

Clara – I'm starting to wonder if it's all going to be as straightforward as we thought.

Alex – Want to see the terrace?

Clara *(suggestively)* – How about showing me the bedroom first?

Alex – Right...

He takes her hand and starts towards the hall. The doorbell rings again.

Clara – Again?

Alex – Let it ring. We don't have to answer.

Clara – You've just invited the entire building to a party. We can hardly leave them on the doorstep.

Alex – You think it's them already?

Clara – Who else? Father Christmas?

Alex – I'll go.

Clara – No, I'll deal with it this time.

Alex *(apprehensively)* – Just try to be nice.

Clara – I promise I'll be the perfect hostess.

Alex – Fine.

Clara exits. Alex sighs and studies the painting. An ancient-looking landline phone rings. After hesitating, he answers.

Alex – Hello...? Yes, that's right... No, I'm her great-nephew... The neighbours' party? Er... yes, here. Well... Right, see you in a minute.

He hangs up. Clara returns with Mrs Martin, carrying a large bowl of sangria, and Dr Bernard, carrying a savoury tart.

Martin – Here comes the sangria!

Bernard – Hello, hello! I've made an onion tart!

Martin – Didn't you make leek tart last year?

Bernard – I thought I'd try something different. To be honest, I didn't have any leeks. I hope you like onions!

Martin – Of course, Doctor! Everyone loves onions. They're very good for you. I put them in everything.

Bernard – I hope you haven't put any in the sangria.

The two women laugh idiotically. Alex and Clara look appalled.

Martin – Oh dear, I've forgotten my manners! This is Dr Bernard. Her surgery is downstairs. Isn't it convenient to have a doctor in the building? We had a dentist as

well, but he's deceased. I mean, he retired last month. We haven't found anyone to replace him.

Bernard – Delighted to meet you both.

Alex – Doctor...

Bernard – Call me Marianne. But I'm afraid I've already forgotten your names.

Clara – Clara.

Alex – Alex.

Bernard – If you could clear that table, dear Clara, we'll set out the buffet.

Clara automatically removes a Chinese vase from the table.

Martin – Alex, there should be a tablecloth in that little cupboard. It would look more respectable.

Alex opens the cupboard and searches in vain.

Bernard – Right at the bottom.

Alex finds the tablecloth and spreads it. Mrs Martin sets down the sangria and Dr Bernard the tart.

Martin – There. People can help themselves here. I wonder where they've all got to. Perhaps you'd like to enjoy the terrace in the meantime.

Alex – Of course.

Bernard – After all, this is your home.

Clara – Thank you for reminding us.

The doorbell rings again.

Bernard – There, you see? You were being unfair. For once, they're on time.

Martin – I'll get it. Then I'll leave the door open or we'll be here all night.

She goes out. The others exchange rather strained smiles.

Bernard – I was with your aunt during her final moments.

Alex – Oh, yes. I'm sorry I never had the pleasure of... Well, I mean...

Clara – What did she actually die of?

Bernard – My dear, once you're over ninety, do you really have to die of anything in particular? I can assure you she didn't suffer.

Mr and Mrs Crampon enter, one carrying a couscous salad, the other a dish of chicory with blue cheese, followed by Mrs Martin.

Mr Crampon – Hello, everyone! Forgive me for not shaking hands, I've got my hands full. Where should I put this?

Mrs Crampon – The buffet's over there! Same as every year.

They set down their dishes and turn to Alex and Clara.

Mr Crampon – Jacques Crampon, insurance broker. This is my wife, Josiane.

Mrs Crampon – And you're Alex and Clara, I believe.

Clara – News travels fast around here.

Mr Crampon – Before she became our caretaker, Mrs Sanchez worked for the secret police in East Germany.

Mrs Crampon – I thought she was Portuguese.

Mr Crampon – It's a joke, Josiane! A joke!

Mrs Crampon – I've brought couscous salad and chicory.

Mr Crampon – Hope you like chicory.

Mrs Crampon – Why do you say that?

Mr Crampon – I can't stand the stuff.

Mrs Crampon – Which is why I've made couscous salad as well. But chicory is delicious. And in season. Don't you like chicory, Alex?

Alex – Well, yes...

Mr Crampon – I didn't even know chicory had a season. I thought it was always there.

Mrs Crampon – It's stuffed with blue cheese. Delicious, and very healthy. Isn't it, Doctor?

Bernard – In my whole career, I've never had a patient die after eating chicory with blue cheese.

Mr Crampon – That's because none of your patients ever ate my wife's.

Mrs Crampon shoots him a murderous look.

Mr Crampon – I'm joking, Josiane! We're here to have a good time together. As neighbours!

Clara – And it's off to a wonderful start.

The old telephone rings. Before Alex can move, Mrs Martin instinctively answers it.

Martin – Hello? Ah, Father... Of course, I understand... No problem, we'll wait... See you shortly.

She puts the receiver down. Alex and Clara stare in astonishment.

Martin – Father Dessaint. He'll be joining us, but he's been held up by an emergency. Last rites.

Clara – Father Dessaint?

Martin – Father Dessaint is a holy man. Or so he keeps telling us.

Mr Crampon – He lives on the ground floor. His bishop sold the old presbytery to a gay couple who turned it into a gay-friendly guesthouse.

Bernard – Even the Church must be short of money, if it's selling the family silver.

Martin – You have no idea. Sometimes it feels as if we're all living in Sodom.

An awkward silence.

Bernard – Shall I pour something to get the party started?

Mr Crampon – Come on, let's get this party started!

Martin – Sangria?

Mrs Crampon – Sangria.

Martin – Sangria for everyone, then!

Mr Crampon – At least you don't need a corkscrew for sangria!

Everyone bursts out laughing except Alex and Clara.

Bernard – It's our little joke. Germaine could never remember where she'd put her corkscrew.

Everyone laughs again. Alex and Clara manage strained smiles and exchange a worried glance.

Martin – Poor Germaine was getting a little confused towards the end, you know.

Bernard – At nearly a hundred, nobody has a perfect memory. Otherwise, she was in remarkable shape for her age.

Clara – So she died in excellent health, Doctor?

An embarrassed silence is broken by the arrival of Father Dessaint and Baroness de la Cour.

Dessaint – Good evening, everyone! And welcome to our newcomers!

Mr Crampon – Here comes Father Peanuts!

Alex – Father Peanuts... Hello.

All the neighbours roar with laughter.

Bernard – They're a laugh a minute...

Martin – It's an old joke. Every year, without fail, Father Dessaint brings a packet of peanuts to the party.

Dessaint – And here they are! Why break with tradition?

He produces a packet of peanuts, adds it to the buffet, and shakes hands with Alex and Clara.

Dessaint – Father Dessaint, at your service. And this is Baroness de la Cour.

Mrs Crampon – Who, as usual, seems to have brought absolutely nothing.

Baroness – There's always far too much food. Everyone ends up taking home leftovers. Why not start with the leftovers?

Another burst of laughter.

Martin – This is going to be such fun!

Dessaint – And this year our little gathering has a special significance for us all.

Martin – Of course. Forgive me. For a moment I forgot dear Germaine had left us.

Dessaint – It's moving to be gathered in her home tonight. I half expect her to walk through that door with one of her wonderful walnut cakes. She guarded the recipe so jealously...

Mrs Crampon – Your aunt was full of secrets.

Alex – You can say that again. She managed to keep her very existence a secret from me.

Dessaint – I had the privilege of administering the last rites to your aunt before God called her to Him. At least you can rest assured she died with the comfort of the Church.

Alex – How very... reassuring.

Clara – So Germaine was very devout?

Dessaint – Devout? I'd say militant.

Martin – When same-sex marriage became legal, she was out protesting in the streets. She had a holy horror of homosexuals!

Clara – Really?

Alex and Clara are appalled.

Bernard – Those were the days...

Mrs Crampon – It brought us all together around our shared values.

Martin – And gave us an excuse for a jolly picnic in the park near the Eiffel Tower, washed down with some very good communion wine. Isn't that right, Father?

Dessaint – I'm sure Germaine would want us to celebrate this happy moment of fellowship once more. *(He raises his glass.)* To a truly remarkable woman!

They raise their glasses and drink. Angela enters in Gothic dress, casting a chill over the party.

Martin – Ah, here comes Angela.

Angela – Evening, you old fossils. Anything to drink? I'm desperate for a fix.

Martin – Angela is a painter. She has a studio on the ground floor.

Bernard – Mrs Crampon, would you be kind enough to give Angela a glass of blood?

Mrs Crampon – You mean sangria, surely?

Bernard – Isn't that what I said?

Mrs Crampon hands Angela a glass. Angela drains it in one gulp under the neighbours' disapproving eyes.

Angela – God, I needed that.

Clara – And what sort of pictures do you paint? Abstract? Figurative?

Angela – I'm going through my red period.

Alex – Like Picasso, then? Though his was blue, of course.

Angela – No, I mean red wine. I'm drinking plenty of it. Not doing much painting.

Forced laughter.

Martin – Artists, you know...

Dessaint – Shall we move onto the terrace?

Mr Crampon – Good idea.

The others leave, with Alex and Clara alone with Angela.

Angela – Relax. I may look like a vampire, but I'm not. The real bloodsuckers have just gone onto the terrace.

Clara – Have they?

Angela – Do you know how your grandmother died?

Alex – My great-aunt. She was very old. I hadn't really given it any thought.

Angela – Germaine was in excellent health. She could easily have lived to a hundred.

Clara – I don't like the sound of that 'could have'.

Alex – Did someone have a grudge against her?

Angela evades the question with an enigmatic smile.

Angela – Do you like that portrait?

Alex – It's rather old-fashioned, isn't it?

Angela – I painted it.

Clara – Oh! Well, it's very... It certainly has something.

Angela – Don't strain yourselves. Germaine commissioned it.

Alex – Did she?

Clara – Was he her fiancé?

Angela – Germaine gave me a photograph of Marshal Pétain to copy, from when he was still a colonel. Before he sided with the Nazis.

The baroness returns.

Baroness – Don't mind me.

She puts several snacks from the buffet into her handbag, then pours herself a drink and sips it with a look of disgust.

Baroness – Sangria... How common.

She goes out again.

Clara – Is she really a baroness?

Angela – Who knows? In this building, nobody seems to be quite who they claim to be. You'll find out... if you live long enough.

A pause.

Clara – Do you know something about Germaine's death that we ought to know?

Alex – I thought she had a heart attack or something.

Angela – I can't be sure, but there are different stories about how she died.

Clara – What stories?

Angela – According to the caretaker, they found her body in the courtyard.

Alex – I thought she died in bed.

Angela – Seven floors down...

Clara – Maybe the lift was broken. At her age, taking the stairs might have been too much for her heart.

Angela – Judging by the state of the body, she didn't take the stairs. Or the lift.

Alex – Ah.

Angela – Mrs Sanchez says it was a terrible sight. You wouldn't have recognised her.

Alex – I wouldn't have recognised her anyway. I'd never seen her.

Clara *(thoughtfully)* – She fell? From the terrace?

Alex – The railing's quite high. She'd have had to climb over it deliberately.

Angela – Unless someone helped her over.

Clara – You're suggesting murder? That's a very serious accusation.

Alex – But Dr Bernard said she was with my aunt in her final moments.

Angela – She signed the death certificate, that's for sure. Probably why there was no investigation. When someone is over ninety, the police don't tend to ask questions.

Clara – That's monstrous!

Angela – I'll get some air on the terrace. If you find me dead in the courtyard, you'll know it wasn't suicide.

She exits. Alex and Clara exchange a look of horror.

Alex – I'm beginning to wonder whether this inheritance is such a bargain.

Clara – Maybe she's inventing the whole thing.

Alex – Who?

Clara – Angela! She's hardly the most reliable witness.

Alex – Let's just say she stands out from the crowd.

Clara – Though the rest of them aren't exactly normal either. Do you really think they could have murdered Germaine?

Alex – Why would they? They all seem so fond of her.

Clara – Or so they say. And there's something about that priest... I'm sure I've seen him somewhere before.

Sam, a sex worker or someone in drag, appears behind them without being noticed.

Sam – Hello!

They jump.

Clara – You gave me a fright!

Sam – Sorry. The door was open, so I let myself in. Is this the neighbours' party?

Alex – Well, yes...

Sam – You must be Alex and Clara.

Clara – And you are?

Sam – Sam. I've just moved into the flat on the first floor. I know I don't exactly fit the building's image. Everyone here seems to be a doctor or a lawyer.

Alex – I take it you're neither.

Sam – No, but I charge by the hour, just like they do. And I pay my taxes, of course...

Mr Crampon returns with Mrs Martin and Father Dessaint.

Martin – What on earth is that?

Sam – Your new tenant downstairs.

Martin – Downstairs?

Sam kisses Mr Crampon on both cheeks.

Sam – Hello, darling.

Mr Crampon *(flustered)* – Thank goodness my wife's not here.

Martin – That apartment has been empty for years!

Sam – Not any more. The caretaker told me you were having a party. As I'm new too, I thought it would be a chance to meet everyone.

Mr Crampon – Quite right! Very pleased you came!

Mrs Crampon enters.

Mrs Crampon – Who's that?

Mr Crampon – May I introduce my wife, Jeanine.

Mrs Crampon – My name's Josiane.

Mr Crampon – Of course, forgive me. Jeanine's my secretary. I keep muddling them up.

Sam – Hello, Josiane. Delighted. May I call you Josiane?

Mrs Crampon – Madame will do. May I call you Madame?

Sam – Just Sam. That'll do nicely.

Mrs Crampon – And Sam is short for...?

Sam – Nothing. Just Sam.

Mrs Crampon – Just Sam. I see. Keeping an air of mystery.

Mr Crampon – Well, we're counting on you to liven things up. This party's dying on its feet. *(Noticing Alex and Clara)* Oh, sorry. No disrespect to Germaine. Her death has been such a shock to us all...

Mrs Crampon – Yes, it's strange to be here among her furniture and keepsakes. And perhaps this isn't the moment, but Germaine always said she'd leave me that little chest of drawers when she died.

Clara – Did she?

Mr Crampon – As an insurance broker, I'm used to valuing antiques. I can assure you that chest has sentimental value and nothing else.

Alex – We were planning to change the furniture before moving in, so why not?

Clara – Especially if it was her last wish...

The baroness returns.

Baroness – Quite. And she's not here to contradict us, is she? Germaine must have known her time was nearly up. She promised me that Chinese vase.

Mrs Crampon – You? She hardly knew you!

Baroness – You don't have to know someone long to form an opinion of them.

Mrs Sanchez, the caretaker, arrives.

Sanchez – The Chinese vase? She promised that to me!

Mr Crampon – This is Mrs Sanchez, our caretaker.

Sanchez – Who does she think she is?

Baroness – Are you calling me a liar?

Sanchez – Don't put on airs with me. Three generations of Sanchez women have looked after this building.

Baroness – Three generations of caretakers. Such distinguished ancestry. Why don't you go back to your little lodge?

Sanchez – Does Your Ladyship live in a castle? No, you live on the ground floor, looking out onto the dustbins in the courtyard.

Baroness – That vase belongs to me. The old woman gave it to me. She enjoyed my conversation, you know.

The baroness seizes the vase.

Sanchez – It's mine, I tell you! Germaine promised it to me. I cleaned for her for thirty years, and I never broke a thing.

The caretaker tries to wrest the vase away.

Dessaint – Ladies, please! A little restraint!

Baroness – Let go, you bitch!

Dessaint – Baroness, you ought to set an example. Didn't Saint Martin give half his cloak to a beggar?

Baroness – You idiot! It's a vase! How am I supposed to give someone half a vase?

The vase falls and smashes. Alex and Clara are appalled. The tension instantly evaporates.

Dessaint – Well, there we are.

Sanchez – I'm terribly sorry.

Baroness – No, it was my fault. I don't know what came over me.

Mr Crampon *(to Alex and Clara)* – Please forgive us. Everyone's a little on edge.

Mrs Crampon – Grief, I suppose. We're all having trouble coming to terms with the loss of Germaine's inheritance.

Martin – You mean the loss of Germaine herself, surely.

Mr Crampon – As I said, none of this clutter is worth anything. It's all just memories.

Martin – And memories are priceless, aren't they?

Dessaint – Let us remember the lesson of the broken vase.

Sam – Shall we get some air on the terrace? It might do us good.

They leave, abandoning Alex and Clara.

Clara – They're dangerous lunatics, I'm telling you.

Alex – For a moment I thought those two were going to kill each other.

Clara – Over a vase!

Alex – We'll inventory this chamber of horrors and decide what to keep. If everyone took one thing home...

Clara – It would save us taking it all to the rubbish dump.

Alex – Exactly. We could let everyone choose a keepsake in memory of our dear departed.

Clara – Better draw names out of a hat, or you'll start another riot.

Alex – Do you think Germaine deliberately promised the same vase to two people?

Clara – Why would she do that?

Dr Zebra enters.

Zebra – Some people like to leave the world knowing they've left a wonderful mess behind. A quarrel over a chamber pot, a fortune, a piece of land no one can agree how

to divide... Maybe it's their way of becoming immortal. They live on in all the trouble they leave behind. At least they're sure we won't forget them in a hurry. Dr Zebra, psychotherapist. Fifth floor. Your neighbour.

Clara – A psychoanalyst? Please, do come in. There's always room for another mad person.

Alex – I take it you knew Aunt Germaine well. Was she one of your patients?

Zebra – If she had been, I couldn't tell you. Professional confidentiality. But no. Her generation preferred confessing their secrets to a priest rather than a therapist.

Alex – Much cheaper, for one thing.

Zebra – And much less painful. With me, two prayers and a quick apology won't get you off the hook.

Clara – That's right. In psychoanalysis you're usually trying to kill your own father.

Zebra – And have you managed to kill yours?

Clara is embarrassed.

Alex – In any event, you did know Germaine?

Zebra – I observed her from a distance. An occupational hazard.

Clara – Since she wasn't a patient, you can tell us about her.

Zebra – Only rumours. Rumours your aunt seemed to enjoy spreading herself.

Alex – Such as?

Zebra – According to local legend, she kept a treasure hidden in the apartment.

Clara – A treasure?

Zebra – The caretaker says Germaine's late husband made a fortune on the black market during the war, with the occupying Germans' blessing.

Alex – So he had to hide the dirty money after France was liberated.

Zebra – She supposedly acquired this apartment during that troubled time. The previous owners were arrested by the Nazi secret police after someone denounced them. Nobody seems to know what became of them.

Clara – Really?

Alex – So nobody knows exactly what the treasure is, or where it might be hidden.

Zebra – Unless the whole thing is a myth, of course.

Clara – But you say Germaine spread the story herself. Why would she want people to think she collaborated with the Nazis?

Zebra – Perhaps she found it useful to let everyone believe she owned a secret fortune. A fortune she might leave to whoever was kindest to her while she was alive.

Clara – I see...

Zebra – I'll join the others on the terrace. That's where the party usually is, I imagine.

Dr Zebra leaves.

Clara – I'm liking Aunt Germaine less and less by the minute.

Alex – And the inheritance is looking more and more suspicious.

Clara – No wonder the rest of the family cut her off.

Alex – What if they've all come here to find the old woman's treasure?

Clara – That would explain why they all want to leave with something.

Alex – There could have been something hidden in that vase.

Clara – We'd have noticed, wouldn't we?

Alex – Perhaps the chest of drawers has a false bottom.

Clara – Or there's a priceless painting under that dreadful portrait.

Alex – Unless one of them has already found the treasure.

Clara – And they decided to get rid of the old woman and share the spoils.

Alex – Why would they be here tonight, then?

Clara – Because they haven't managed to get their hands on the apartment yet.

Alex – We're in their way, that's for sure.

A pause.

Clara – Perhaps they'll report us to the police as well.

Alex – What for? We haven't done anything wrong.

Clara – Do you think the Jewish families your aunt denounced had done anything wrong?

Alex – Do you think those people were Jewish?

Clara – Most likely.

Alex – We're not living under the Nazis now! And we're not Jewish.

Clara – Speak for yourself.

Alex – You're Jewish?

Clara – Would that bother you?

Alex – Not at all. I just didn't know.

Clara – Let's say I have Jewish roots.

Alex – Jewish roots? Don't we all have Jewish roots? I mean, before we were Christians, we were all Jewish. Even Jesus was Jewish, wasn't he?

Clara – So you think everyone was Jewish back then?

Alex – No, that's not what I meant... So you have Jewish roots. I didn't know.

Clara – A week ago you had no idea you had a family history of antisemitism, either.

Alex – That's absurd! I'm not responsible for what my aunt did during the war. I wasn't even born!

Clara – Well, the idea that Germaine reported Jewish people to the Nazis to steal their apartment, and that we could now live in that apartment because we've inherited it... That bothers me.

A silence.

Alex – I think we're getting carried away.

Clara – You're right. It's only a neighbours' party, after all.

Alex – Unless they've put something in the sangria.

Clara – Let's go and see what they're plotting on the terrace.

Alex – Really?

Clara – It is our home, isn't it?

Alex – If you say so...

They exit. Sam enters and starts searching the room. Mrs Sanchez catches Sam in the act.

Sanchez – Oh, don't mind me!

Sam – Mrs Sanchez! It's not what you think. I'm not who you think I am.

Sanchez – I'd already guessed that much.

Sam – I can tell you the truth. You're almost in the same line of work.

Sanchez – What work? Are you calling me a prostitute?

Sam shows her a police identity card.

Sam – Detective Ramirez.

Sanchez – A detective?

Sam puts a finger to their lips to indicate secrecy.

Sam – I'm working undercover.

Sanchez – Under what cover?

Sam – In disguise, Mrs Sanchez! Pretending to be someone else.

Sanchez – Oh, I see.

Sam – We have good reason to believe that the old woman... What was her name?

Sanchez – Germaine.

Sam – Right. We believe Germaine did not die of natural causes.

Sanchez – You don't say?

Sam – It may be murder. We don't have proof yet. That's why I'm here.

Sanchez – Oh.

Sam – You're very quiet for a caretaker, I must say.

Sanchez – Yes.

Sam – So, do you know anything?

Sanchez – Not really.

Sam – I can see you'll be a tremendous help. Do you know exactly how Germaine died?

Sanchez – It was an accident, wasn't it?

Sam – Who knows? When one possible murderer signs the death certificate and another administers the last rites immediately afterwards...

Sanchez – Oh, I see...

Sam – And I suppose you know nothing about the treasure she supposedly hid here.

Sanchez – No.

Sam – Let's join the others on the terrace before someone notices us. If you hear anything useful, report to me immediately.

Sanchez – Very well.

Sam – Consider yourself my assistant from now on, Sanchez.

They leave. Colonel Leroy enters with Mr Petit, a lawyer.

Petit – Nobody here.

Leroy – But the buffet's in the usual place.

Petit – They must be on the terrace.

Leroy – Let's have a drink while we can.

Petit – Sangria?

Leroy – Why not?

Petit – Nothing else on offer anyway.

They clink glasses and drink.

Leroy – Mrs Martin's sangria is as undrinkable as ever.

Petit – It gets worse every year.

They drink again.

Leroy – I wonder if that bloody priest knows something.

Petit – Father Dessaint? You think so?

Leroy – She used to confess to him, didn't she?

Petit – You think that sanctimonious hypocrite might try to cheat us?

Leroy – Would you trust a priest?

Petit – Especially one who's left the priesthood.

Leroy – Why did his bishop throw him out, anyway? He says he resigned, but I don't believe a word of it.

Petit – Given the shortage of priests, the Church doesn't get rid of one unless he's done something really serious.

Leroy – Exactly. They wouldn't sack him over a little child abuse.

Petit – Maybe he wanted to keep saying Mass in Latin, or something.

Leroy – You're his lawyer. You must know the truth.

Petit – Professional confidentiality.

Leroy – Don't give me that.

Petit – I was merely his lawyer, not his confessor.

Leroy – I'm sure he knows where the old woman hid the money. I'll hear his confession, don't you worry.

Petit – Not too rough, Colonel. We've already got one death on our hands.

Leroy – Relax. I can be very persuasive. And I never leave marks.

Petit – Who else might know about her money?

Leroy – The insurance broker?

Petit – Unlikely. Germaine had good reason not to trust him.

Leroy – Why did he go to prison, by the way?

Petit – He collected premiums to insure his clients' property. But instead of paying them to the insurers, he pocketed the lot.

Leroy – A man after my own heart. He knows a thing or two about moving other people's money.

Petit – He was caught after a fire. His client claimed on the policy and discovered he wasn't insured.

Leroy – Unfortunate.

Petit – The worst part is, the client started the fire himself. He couldn't sell his country house, so he tried to collect the insurance money.

Leroy – What a fool. But you seem to know a great deal about the case.

Petit – Yes. I was the fool.

Leroy – We're running out of time. Once those two idiots have moved in for good, it'll be much harder to search the apartment.

Leroy starts opening drawers and rummaging. Petit joins in. Mr Crampon returns with Father Dessaint.

Mr Crampon – Looking for something?

Petit – Probably the same thing as you.

Leroy – You were her insurance broker. You must have made an inventory of her possessions.

Mr Crampon – If Germaine really had a treasure, she evidently preferred to keep it off the inventory.

Leroy – And you, Father? You heard her confessions!

Dessaint – Alas, my son, Germaine didn't tell me everything. And even if she had, I am bound by the seal of confession.

Mr Crampon – As long as you're not planning to screw us behind our backs.

Petit and Mr Crampon start searching the room.

Dessaint – Have faith, my children. Doesn't the Bible say, 'Seek and you shall find; ask and it shall be given; knock and the door shall be opened'?

Mr Crampon – Now he's taking the piss!

Leroy approaches the priest menacingly.

Leroy – Nothing you want to confess, Father? Confide in me and I'll absolve you. Or if you'd rather die a martyr, I can administer the last rites myself.

Alex and Clara reappear and catch them. Leroy releases the priest's collar. Petit and Crampon abruptly stop searching.

Petit – Ah, my dear friends! We were just coming to join you. Mr Petit, lawyer and member of the bar.

Leroy – And all his clients end up behind bars.

Petit – And this is Colonel Leroy.

Leroy – Your servant.

Alex – Have you... lost something?

Petit – Er, yes. The colonel can't find his mobile phone.

Clara – Why don't you call it?

Petit – Call the colonel? He's standing right beside me!

Clara – Call his phone. So you can hear where it is.

Petit – Oh! Yes, of course... But I don't think I have his number.

Alex – Then ask him. Since he's right beside you.

Petit – Right. Ah, there it is!

He dials a number. A phone rings in the colonel's pocket.

Leroy – How silly. I keep looking for the bloody thing when it's in my pocket all along.

Petit – Well, now that we've all been introduced...

An awkward pause.

Leroy – Father, would you join me on the terrace? I've got a little moral dilemma I want to discuss.

Dessaint *(wary)* – If I can help, my son...

They leave.

Petit – I'll put some music on.

He starts the music. Screams are heard. He turns the volume up.

Petit – I love this part. Chopin, isn't it?

Clara – Wagner.

Petit – That's it! On the tip of my tongue. *(Sounds of a struggle.)* I'd better see what's happening. The colonel can be hot-headed. He does get rather worked up when he debates theology with Father Dessaint.

He exits. Clara turns down the music.

Clara – It's strange. I know I've seen that priest somewhere before.

Alex – Where would you have met a priest?

Clara – I did make my first communion.

Alex – You told me you were Jewish!

Clara – I never said I was Jewish. It's... more complicated than that.

Dr Zebra comes back and pours herself some sangria.

Clara – Do you know Father Dessaint well?

Zebra – Priests very rarely go into analysis. Such a shame. They're the people who need it most.

Clara – I know I've met him somewhere, but I can't remember where.

Zebra – Sometimes there are things we prefer to forget. That's called repression.

Alex – True... It's like Aunt Germaine. I didn't know I had an aunt, yet when I heard about her I wasn't really surprised. I suppose I'd heard her name as a child.

Zebra – Family secrets are like bodies dumped in the river with a weight tied to their feet. Given enough time, and a little decomposition, they always float to the surface.

Alex – Aunt Germaine...

Zebra – The black sheep of the family, cast out for collaborating with the Nazis.

A silence.

Clara – When I was a teenager everyone made fun of me because my breasts developed before the other girls'. I wonder why that memory's suddenly come back.

Zebra – Perhaps seeing that priest has brought back a memory from your childhood.

Another silence. Clara looks shaken.

Clara – That's it. I remember now! First communion... Religious instruction... It was him!

Alex – Him?

Clara – I wanted to make my first communion like all my schoolfriends, to fit in. I went to a Catholic school.

Alex – You never told me that, either. You're always going on about state schools!

Zebra – You have to accept it, my poor man. Women don't tell you everything. Not even your saintly mother. After all, she hid the existence of your aunt who sympathised with the Nazis.

Clara – He knew I had Jewish roots. He said he could close his eyes to that... provided I closed mine, too.

She rushes out. Petit returns and turns up the music.

Petit – Oh, I love this part!

The baroness returns.

Baroness – We can barely hear ourselves think.

Zebra – On the contrary. Things are becoming clearer by the minute.

Petit – Music is supposed to soothe the savage beast... Though perhaps not the savage priest.

Leroy returns.

Leroy – Baroness, my respects. May I have this dance?

Baroness – I'm sorry, Colonel, but I don't put anyone below brigadier-general on my dance card. Unless the colonel is very young.

Leroy – And 'baroness' is the lowest rung of the aristocracy, isn't it?

Baroness – Besides, unless you're in the army, no one dances to Wagner.

Petit – If no one's dancing, I'll turn it down.

He turns the music down.

Leroy – Shall we go and congratulate Mrs Martin on her sangria?

Zebra – Yes, we'll have to get her recipe.

Petit – She never gives away the secret.

Leroy – My dear fellow, I interrogated prisoners in the army. I can make people talk, even when they have nothing to say.

Petit – He's priceless.

Petit and Colonel Leroy go out. Clara returns.

Alex – Are you all right? You're very pale.

Clara – Yes... I'm better. Though I shouldn't feel better. But it was a relief... I mean...

Alex looks bewildered.

Zebra – I think she's finally killed the father.

Dr Zebra exits.

Alex – These people are sick, I tell you.

Clara – I'm starting to wonder if their madness is contagious.

Alex *(distracted)* – Really?

Clara – I got rather carried away with Father Dessaint. He tried to touch my breasts again, so I shoved him away rather violently.

Alex – But there really is treasure in this flat. Did you see them rummaging everywhere?

Clara – Then we'd better start looking too.

Alex – Where do we start?

Clara – First we'll have to search all of them before they leave.

Alex – Ten minutes ago we were going to let them take a souvenir each, to clear the place.

Clara – Not any more. *(Almost hysterical)* That treasure belongs to us, and we're going to find it!

They begin searching. Mrs Sanchez returns and watches them. They freeze when they notice her.

Alex – Ah, Mrs Sanchez...

Clara – You're the caretaker, aren't you?

Sanchez – I'm looking for that woman, Sam. Have you seen her?

Clara – No.

Alex – So you're the caretaker...

Sanchez – Mm-hm.

Clara – You're the person we should give a Christmas tip to, then.

Alex – I hope my aunt was generous with you.

Sanchez – Germaine? Not exactly. I cleaned her place every week. Not a single tip in thirty years.

Alex – I'm afraid we won't be able to afford a cleaner ourselves.

Clara – We haven't got a secret fortune, unlike Aunt Germaine.

Sanchez – No, generous wasn't the word for her.

Alex – Yet everyone here seemed to love her.

Sanchez – Of course they did. She promised them all they'd be remembered in her will.

Alex – Her will? My aunt made a will?

Mrs Sanchez pours herself sangria.

Sanchez – Nobody's found one since she died. But who knows? It may come floating back to the surface one day, too. Excuse me. I really must talk to the detective... I mean, that prostitute.

She leaves.

Alex – A will! Do you realise what that means?

Clara – What?

Alex – I'm only her great-nephew! I inherit this place because no one found a will specifically naming someone else.

Clara – But you're the only family she has left.

Alex – I'm the heir by default! She could have left everything to someone else. The neighbours, for instance.

Clara – So if that will turns up...

Alex – We're back in our old suburban flat.

Clara – You think that's what they're hunting for? The will?

Alex – If it exists, we'd better find it before they do.

Clara – We can't throw everyone out now.

Alex – Where the hell could she have hidden that will?

Clara – Let's try her bedroom.

They leave. Sam returns and resumes searching the room, only to be interrupted by Mrs Sanchez.

Sanchez – Detective! I've been looking for you. It seems Father Dessaint has had a little domestic accident. I just saw his body, all smashed up in the courtyard.

Sam – That railing really is dangerous. You should get it repaired, Mrs Sanchez. I'll mention it to the building manager.

Sanchez – I've just told you a man is dead, and that's all you can say?

Sam – Quite right. I'll go and have a look.

They leave. Mrs Martin returns with Mr Petit and Colonel Leroy.

Martin – You really have no tact, Colonel. We didn't need another corpse on our hands.

Petit – People are bound to start asking questions.

Leroy – It wasn't me, I swear! I only shook him up a little, then left him with the lady of the house.

Martin – Whatever happened, get rid of the body. Put it in the cellar for now. We'll sort it out later.

Leroy – Leave it to me.

Petit – A priest... Nobody will notice he's gone. No one goes to church any more.

Leroy – Especially not to services in Latin.

Martin – Well, get moving, Colonel! What are you waiting for?

Leroy – I'm going!

The colonel exits.

Petit – To think that priest may have been the only person who knew where Germaine's will was hidden.

Martin – Are you certain it exists?

Petit – I personally advised her to write one. She swore she had.

Martin – But nothing was lodged with her lawyer.

Petit – She may have made a handwritten will.

Martin – Just handwritten?

Petit – Written out by hand on ordinary paper, and hidden somewhere in the flat. Perfectly legal. Provided we can find it.

Martin – What's the point of making a will if you hide it so well nobody can find it?

Petit – Who knows? Perhaps she feared it might fall into the wrong hands.

Martin – That bloody piece of paper must be here somewhere.

Petit – Of course, a will could overturn the great-nephew's inheritance.

Martin – Assuming the old fool left everything to us.

Petit – Where have those two idiots got to, anyway?

Mrs Sanchez enters.

Petit – You used to clean Germaine's apartment. Do you know where she kept her important papers?

Sanchez – Just because I'm a cleaner doesn't mean I go poking through people's private things!

Dr Zebra enters, followed by Colonel Leroy.

Martin – What about you, Dr Zebra? Any ideas?

Zebra – I'm a psychoanalyst, not a fortune-teller.

Petit – But surely you understand the mysteries of the human mind.

Zebra – Have you read 'The Purloined Letter' by Edgar Allan Poe?

Martin – I didn't know he'd written to us. Is he a new tenant?

Zebra – Sometimes the best way to hide something is to put it in plain sight, where nobody thinks to look.

She goes out.

Leroy – I can't stand her superior manner. Always speaking in riddles.

Martin – In plain sight... Perhaps she's right. What's the most obvious thing in this room?

They look about them, puzzled, without noticing the portrait dominating the room. They all begin searching. Mrs Crampon enters.

Mrs Crampon – I think I've found something!

Everyone turns. She holds up a wig.

Martin – What's that?

Mrs Crampon – A wig.

Leroy – So?

Martin – Are you going to tell us Germaine was secretly a drag queen?

Sanchez – It's a souvenir.

Petit – A souvenir of what?

Sanchez – The wig she must have worn when they shaved her head after the Liberation, to punish her for collaborating with the Nazis.

Mrs Sanchez tries on the wig. Alex and Clara return.

Alex – What are you doing with that?

Martin – What? Aren't we allowed to have fun?

Leroy – Exactly. This is getting irritating. Are you spying on us?

Clara – We're spying on you?

Alex – It's our home, isn't it?

Petit – For the moment.

Clara – For the moment? What's that supposed to mean?

Leroy – You know perfectly well. You have no right to be here. You didn't even know Germaine.

Alex – I am related to her. And the law is the law. Whether you like it or not, I've inherited this apartment.

Sanchez – You weren't even at Germaine's funeral!

Clara – And you only looked after her because you wanted to be in her will!

Martin – Your aunt hated left-wingers. She'd never have left her property to people like you!

Alex – You're beginning to get on our bloody nerves.

Leroy – Watch your tongue when you speak to Mrs Martin, young man. Or do you want to end up like your aunt?

Alex – So it's true? You murdered Germaine?

Petit – Colonel, control yourself. You know perfectly well Germaine died in an accident.

Dr Bernard enters, followed by Sam.

Clara – I thought she'd had a heart attack. Didn't she, Doctor?

Bernard – Well, we're not entirely sure.

Alex – Yet you signed the death certificate, didn't you?

Bernard – Forensic medicine isn't an exact science, you know.

Clara – Surely you can tell whether she died of a heart attack, a fall from the seventh floor, or a bullet in the back!

Alex – Or a massive dose of sleeping pills, or being strangled!

Mrs Crampon – Well, it was a bit of everything, really.

A long, appalled silence.

Sanchez *(aside to Sam)* – What are you waiting for? Arrest them!

Sam – I'm waiting for more evidence. Trust me, leave it to the police.

Sam exits, followed by Mrs Sanchez.

Petit – I think Mrs Crampon has had rather too much of that wonderful sangria. Perhaps her husband could take her outside for some air.

Mr Crampon – Come on, darling.

Mrs Crampon – I can still stand on my own two feet!

Mr Crampon leads his wife out. Dr Zebra returns and helps herself to sangria.

Petit – Perhaps we've all had a little too much of Mrs Martin's excellent concoction.

Bernard – You really must tell me your recipe sometime.

Zebra – The secret of good sangria, as of any family gathering, is to let everything stew in its own juices.

She staggers off, quite drunk.

Petit – We all need to pull ourselves together. After all, we're only here for the neighbours' party and to remember our dear departed friend.

Leroy – And she cost us dearly.

Bernard – And what do you do for a living, dear Alex?

Alex – I'm a literary editor. I publish travel guides.

Martin – Travel guides! How fascinating.

Petit – So you must travel a great deal.

Alex – You can publish detective stories without being a detective or a criminal, you know.

Clara – These days, you can even write a novel without being a novelist.

Bernard – And what about you, miss?

Clara – I teach English.

Martin *(absently)* – Oh, that's nice.

Bernard – So I suppose you have to speak English to teach it?

Clara – For the moment. But teachers are so hard to recruit, it may soon be optional.

Martin – Like doctors. There aren't any left! We have to bring them in from abroad. Mine's black, would you believe?

Petit – Really?

Bernard – And priests too. With so few people entering the Church, soon you won't even have to believe in God to say Mass.

Petit – Or even be Catholic. They're talking about turning our churches into synagogues, aren't they?

Bernard – I think you mean mosques.

Petit – Same difference.

Mr Crampon returns.

Mr Crampon – Anyone for more sangria?

Martin – Why not?

The atmosphere is strained.

Alex – No, thank you.

Clara – Me neither. I've had enough.

Alex – It's getting rather late, isn't it?

Martin – One last glass. For the road.

Mr Crampon – We can't part like this. We've hardly had time to get to know each other!

Mrs Martin presses glasses of sangria on Alex and Clara. They reluctantly drink.

Bernard – Delicious, isn't it?

Clara – Yes. I think I'm going to be sick.

Alex – I'll come with you.

They start to hurry out.

Martin – Do you know where the bathroom is?

Bernard – At the end of the hall, straight ahead.

Alex and Clara exit.

Petit – This stuff is disgusting. What on earth do you put in it?

Mr Crampon – You're not trying to poison us as well, so you can keep the inheritance all to yourself?

Bernard – Come now. You know Germaine's death was an unfortunate accident.

Petit – In legal terms, at worst, it was involuntary manslaughter.

Martin – You could almost call it a domestic accident followed by a medical error.

Mr Crampon – Whatever it was, if we don't find that will, we'll get nothing.

Martin – The old woman led us all a merry dance.

Bernard – Are we sure there even is a will?

Mrs Sanchez returns.

Sanchez – We've searched everywhere.

Petit – What if those two found it before we did?

Bernard – Those two?

Petit – Those nosy little bastards!

Martin – And got rid of it?

Bernard – That would be in their interests, wouldn't it?

Leroy – We should question them.

Bernard – No unnecessary violence, though.

Leroy – We'll wait till they come back.

Martin – We've already searched everywhere in here.

Mr Crampon – While they're in the bathroom, let's search the rest of the flat.

Martin – See? My sangria does have its uses.

They exit. Alex and Clara return.

Alex – Do you think they've gone?

Clara – I doubt it. Not while the will's missing.

Alex – Where the hell did that woman hide it?

Clara – In a safe?

Alex – In films, safes are often hidden behind paintings.

Together they lift the portrait off its hooks.

Alex – Bloody hell, it's heavy!

They lean the picture against a piece of furniture.

Clara – No safe.

Alex notices something on the back of the painting.

Alex – Hang on. Look at this.

They turn the painting around. The back of the canvas is covered in writing.

Clara – Aunt Germaine's will...

They quickly turn the picture round again, almost afraid of what they've found.

Alex – That's rather eerie.

Clara – Like a message left by a ghost.

Alex – What do we do?

Clara – Pretend we never found it?

Alex – Or destroy it and pretend it never existed. Just to be safe.

Clara – But perhaps she left the apartment to you after all. You didn't know she existed, but she knew she had a great-nephew, didn't she?

Alex – That would solve everything. But I wouldn't count on it.

Clara – Let's at least read it before deciding whether to destroy it.

Alex – True. Might save us a rather awkward crisis of conscience.

Clara – If we can keep this beautiful old Parisian apartment without trampling on the last wishes of an old antisemite.

Alex – Quite. And if it deprives me of my rightful inheritance, there'll be time to argue with my conscience then.

Clara – An inheritance built on stealing from my Jewish ancestors after sending them to the death camps.

Alex – In a way, that would mean you'd be getting some of it back.

Clara – An act of justice, you mean? Putting things right?

Alex – A rather convenient argument, but not entirely without merit.

Clara – And it is a beautiful apartment...

Alex – Right. I'll read it. Keep them busy for a moment.

Clara goes towards the hallway. Alex turns the painting around and reads the writing on the back.

Alex – That old bitch!

He puts the painting back. Clara returns, followed by Mr Crampon.

Mr Crampon *(insistently)* – So we're going to be neighbours!

Clara – Yes... Well, perhaps. But I ran into Sam earlier, and I think Sam wants a private word with you.

Mr Crampon – In private?

Clara – I shouldn't say this, but I think you've made quite an impression. Sam's out on the terrace.

Mr Crampon – I'll go and find her.

He exits.

Clara – Well?

Alex – The neighbours only inherit the furniture and knick-knacks.

Clara – And the apartment?

Alex – She's left it to two organisations.

Clara – Perhaps she was trying to clear her conscience before she died, after everything she did with Marshal Pétain and the Nazi collaborators.

Alex *(uneasily)* – Well... Yes...

Clara – Which charities?

Alex – I'll have to read that bit again. I only had time to skim it.

Clara – We haven't got much time. We have to decide.

Alex – So what do we do?

He hesitates.

Clara – It is Germaine's last will and testament.

Alex – And hiding that enormous painting won't exactly be easy.

Clara – And if somebody ever turns it round...

Alex – So we give up? Tell them we've found the will?

Clara – Can you imagine living here, surrounded by those psychopaths? They may have killed your aunt after torturing her to learn where she'd hidden the treasure.

Alex – We could be next.

A moment's hesitation.

Clara – Besides, the flat isn't all that marvellous.

Alex – Don't overdo it. At least try to sound convincing.

Clara – Oh, bloody hell. An apartment in the heart of Paris with a view of the Eiffel Tower!

Alex – Well, on the other hand, we'd have had to pay a fortune in inheritance tax.

Clara – You're right. Better let it go.

Alex – Let's take one last look at the Eiffel Tower.

Clara – That's only going to make it worse.

Alex – We can still change our minds.

They leave. Mrs Martin returns with the other neighbours, except for Sam and the baroness.

Martin – Nothing.

Mr Crampon – That rotten old cow made fools of us.

Bernard – We may have to accept we'll never receive the reward we deserve for all those years of selfless devotion.

Leroy – So we killed the old woman for nothing.

Alex and Clara return.

Petit – And of course you're going to tell us you haven't found anything either?

Alex – Well, actually...

To Alex's surprise, Clara plays innocent.

Clara – Found what?

But the portrait, carelessly rehung, falls off the wall. Everyone sees the writing on the back.

Petit – Germaine's will!

Bernard – Thank God!

Mr Crampon – It just goes to show, you must never lose faith in people.

Martin – On the back of a painting?

Mrs Crampon – Is that even legal?

Petit – A will has to be written by hand, but the law doesn't say what it has to be written on. A court even accepted one written in blood on the side of a washing machine.

Sanchez – Well? What does it say?

Petit – I'll read it aloud.

He takes out his spectacles and clears his throat. Alex and Clara exchange resigned looks.

Petit – 'This is my last will and testament, written in my own hand, revoking all previous wills...'

Martin – Could we skip the formalities?

Petit – 'I leave my apartment in Paris in equal shares to an organisation fighting racism and antisemitism, and to an association campaigning to rehabilitate Marshal Pétain.'

Zebra – Now that's what I call splitting the difference.

Mr Crampon – If they decide to move in together, that should be quite an arrangement.

General disappointment.

Bernard – Is that all?

Petit – 'I leave the painting to Mrs Martin, the building manager, on behalf of all the residents. It must be displayed in the entrance hall for everyone's enjoyment.'

Martin – Wonderful.

Petit – 'Every other worthless object in this apartment, down to the last teaspoon, is listed and left to one of the neighbours. The Chinese vase is to be owned jointly by the baroness and the caretaker.'

Clara – Aunt Germaine did have a sense of humour after all.

Mrs Martin studies the portrait.

Angela – For everyone's enjoyment? That awful painting? The old hag is laughing at us from the grave!

Alex – Please. She was still my aunt.

Petit – Who, by this very will, has disinherited you.

Mrs Crampon – The bitch!

Sanchez – We're not hanging that in the entrance.

Martin – Well, it might frighten off burglars.

Mr Crampon – Right. Nothing more for us to do here.

Alex – What happens to the will?

Bernard – Do as you like with it. Either way, we get nothing.

Mrs Crampon – Except all this worthless junk.

Mr Crampon – Burn it. Then the flat will be yours by law.

Bernard – You or someone else. What difference does it make to us?

Martin – And you're practically family already.

Petit – We'll certainly be seeing more of one another.

They prepare to leave.

Mrs Crampon – Thank you for a lovely evening, really.

Martin – And once again, our deepest condolences.

They file past Alex and Clara, shaking hands or kissing their cheeks with the solemn expressions of mourners at a funeral. After the last one has left, Alex and Clara sigh.

Alex – Back to square one.

Clara – Not quite. We still have to decide what to do about the will.

Alex – Too late to get rid of it. Too many witnesses. They'd have us over a barrel.

Clara – So?

Alex – I don't know.

Clara – I certainly don't want to spend the night here now.

Alex – Neither do I. What do we do with the painting? I mean, with the will...

Clara – We can't carry it. It's too heavy.

Alex – Let's sleep on it and decide tomorrow.

Clara – Let's go home to our little flat in the suburbs. We can't see the Eiffel Tower from there, but at least it's ours.

Alex – It was too good to be true.

Clara – You can always turn it into a novel.

Alex – Or a play.

Clara – If it's a bestseller, you might earn enough royalties to buy us a place in Paris after all.

Alex hangs the portrait back up and takes a last look at it.

Alex – You were right. That really is Marshal Pétain.

Clara – When he was still a lieutenant.

Alex – Shall I set the alarm when we leave?

Clara – With so little worth stealing?

Alex – I'll set it anyway.

They leave.

Blackout.

A beam from a torch sweeps the room. A second beam appears, crossing the first. One of the two figures finds a light switch. The lights come on. We discover two people dressed as Santa Claus.

Sam – Well, this is awkward.

Baroness – What do we do?

Sam – We can hardly call the police.

They take off their false beards. It's Sam and the baroness.

Baroness – I take it you're not really a police officer.

Sam – Any more than you're really a baroness.

Baroness – So you're my kind of person.

Sam – What kind is that?

Baroness – The kind who changes identity more often than underwear.

Sam – Who told you I was a police officer? Or that I was pretending to be one?

Baroness – If you want to keep a secret, never tell the building's caretaker. *(Eyeing Sam's Santa costume)* Funny we both had the same idea.

Sam – Someone dressed as Santa Claus doesn't attract much attention at this time of year. Not even at night.

Baroness – People positively trust him.

Sam – And I don't suppose you're here to put presents under the tree.

Baroness – No. Shall we split whatever we find?

Sam – If there's anything to split.

They search the apartment.

Baroness – Slim pickings.

Sam – I had good information. I imagine you did too.

Baroness – They said the old woman kept money here. Apparently it was just a rumour.

Sam – A safe, perhaps?

They look behind the portrait.

Baroness – Nothing behind it.

Sam – What about the painting itself?

They inspect it.

Baroness – Just a worthless painting.

Sam – All that trouble for nothing.

Baroness – I was counting on this to restore my family fortunes.

Sam – I was planning to lie on a tropical beach for a few months.

Baroness – Alas, Father Christmas doesn't exist.

Sam – Come on. Let's go.

Baroness – I'll stay a little longer. Better not leave together.

Sam – Good idea. Two Santas together might attract attention.

Baroness – People might wonder which one is the real Santa.

Sam leaves. The baroness waits until Sam has gone, then scratches at the picture frame with a fingernail. Sam returns, suspicious, and catches her.

Sam – I was thinking the same thing. That frame is extraordinarily heavy, isn't it?

Baroness – Solid gold.

Sam – You knew all along?

Baroness – I used to have tea with Germaine. One day I slipped something into her Earl Grey. She was delightful on ecstasy.

They stare at the painting.

Sam – Quite a Christmas present.

Baroness – Even divided in two.

Sam – We'll certainly need both of us to carry it.

Baroness – So perhaps we should thank Aunt Germaine after all.

Sam – Now all we have to do is prove the old saying wrong.

Baroness – Which saying?

Sam – Crime doesn't pay.

Baroness – Oh, I'm not superstitious.

They take the picture off the wall. An alarm begins to shriek. They stare at each other in horror.

Sam – That old bitch!

Blackout.

End.

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

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

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

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

Comedies for 5 to 6

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

Comedies for 7 or more

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

Collection of sketches

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

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

free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

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