

La Comédiathèque

*Last chance
encounter*

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Last chance encounter

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Translation by the author

On the platform of a suburban railway station, a man and a woman who have never met are waiting for the train that will take them to the new destiny they each have chosen for themselves. But their 8:30 train, which they have taken daily, has been canceled. The next one is due in three hours. This situation creates the opportunity for an unlikely encounter that could well change the course of their lives...

Characters

Fred (man)
Alex (woman)

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On the deserted platform of a railway station in a remote suburban village, the stage's edge symbolizing the tracks, a bench stands in the background. A man arrives, carrying a travel bag. After placing it down, he glances at his watch, takes a seat on the bench, and patiently waits. Shortly after, a woman approaches, pulling a wheeled suitcase. Spotting the bench, she hesitates before finally giving in and joining him. Both feign ignorance of the other's presence, each occupied with checking their watches and waiting. After a while, he rises, takes a few steps away, only to return towards the woman.

Fred – Excuse me, do you have the time, please?

She hesitates a little, suspicious, then looks at her watch before answering him, without even smiling.

Alex – It's 8:31.

Fred – Thank you.

He moves a few steps away. They both wait. As signs of impatience start to show on her face, he returns to her.

Alex – Usually, the train is always on time...

Fred – Except when they're on strike, of course.

Alex – Are they on strike?

Fred – Not that I'm aware of...

A pause.

Alex – Would it have passed by already?

Fred – I don't think so.

Alex – Since you were here before me... You didn't see it pass?

Fred – If I had, I would have got in, right?

Alex – It could have passed by... and not stopped.

Fred – Not stop?

Alex – This isn't really a station here. It's just a halt. Not all trains stop.

Fred – The 8:30 one has always stopped.

Alex – Yes...

Fred – I arrived here around twenty-five past and I didn't see any train pass by.

Alex – So it hasn't arrived yet... (*A pause*) Unless it passed by before...

Fred – Before 8:25? The 8:30 train?

Alex – You're right... Late trains exist, but trains leaving before the scheduled time...

Fred – It's only 8:33, it can still arrive.

She sits down on the bench. He remains standing. They wait.

Alex – Or it means they cancelled it.

Fred – Canceled? The 8:30 train? There has always been a train at 8:30. Why would they cancel it?

Alex – I don't know... Maybe there weren't enough people anymore.

Fred – You think there aren't enough people?

Alex – There is only two of us...

Fred – It's true that there are usually more people than that. It's a bit strange...

Alex – Besides, if there's only two of us... maybe it's because they canceled it, precisely... and we're the only ones who don't know about it yet...

Fred – You think so?

Alex – I don't know.

Fred – It's not a train station, but still... The timetable must be posted somewhere...

Alex – Yes, surely...

Fred – There's a notice board right at the entrance, next to the level crossing.

Alex – Where they used to sell tickets. But nobody's been behind the counter for a long time.

Fred – First they take away the ticket counter, then they take away the trains, then they take away the railway station and finally they take away the railway line.

Alex – The timetable should be on the wall over there.

Fred – Yes, it should be.

A pause.

Alex – Aren't you going to check?

Fred – It's on the other side of the track. Imagine if the train arrives while I'm looking at the board.

Alex – So what?

Fred – I wouldn't be able to cross back, and I would miss my train.

Alex – Just before the train arrives, a bell rings, and the barrier lowers. You would have enough time to get back.

Fred – In principle, it's forbidden. I mean... crossing the tracks after the bell sounds.

Alex – Yes... in principle.

Fred – Not to mention it can be dangerous.

Alex – Well... then let's wait.

Fred – When I was a kid, with my little brother, we used to cross the tracks like that, even though the bell was already ringing. One day, my brother lost his shoe in the middle of the tracks. He wanted to go back and get it when the train was approaching, and... *(She gives him a frightened look.)* I grabbed him by the arm at the last moment, and luckily, he made it out. The shoe, on the other hand...

She appears a bit annoyed by this overly dramatic moment. They pause for a moment, and she begins to make a move to leave.

Alex – I'll go and have a look.

Fred – Leave it, I'll go. With your heels...

He moves away and exits backstage. She gazes in the direction where the train is supposed to arrive, waiting. He returns.

Alex – So?

Fred – They canceled it.

Alex – No?

Fred – The new timetables are posted over there. There's no train at 8:30.

Alex – And there isn't another one?

Fred – There was a train at 8:00, it's already gone. And the next one is at 11:30.

Alex – 11:30! But that's in three hours!

They both take in the blow.

Fred – There was a train at 8:30, I'm sure of it.

Alex – Yes, me too. That's why I didn't double-check...

Fred – They cancelled it... Damn it... They've cancelled the 8:30 train!

A brief pause.

Alex – Three hours... I've got a connection in twenty minutes...

Fred – Me too... *(A pause)* I would suggest sharing a taxi, but...

Alex – Finding a taxi around here...

Fred – On foot, it's too far. We'd never be in time for our connection anyway.

Alex – Especially with my suitcase... And I didn't put on comfortable shoes.

Fred – I think our connection is out of the question.

Alex – We can't possibly wait here for three hours...

Fred – Unless you've got another solution...

Thunder rumbles followed by a lightning flash.

Alex – I just hope it doesn't start raining. There's not even anywhere to take shelter...

Fred – I would offer you a coffee, but...

Alex – The closest café is an hour's walk away. We'd barely make it there and back in time.

Fred – I didn't bring an umbrella. Do you have one?

Alex – No...

A pause.

Fred – I'll try my luck hitchhiking. Care to join?

She hesitates, still on guard.

Alex – No, thank you. I'd rather wait here.

Fred – As you wish.

He moves away and exits. She glances at the threatening sky, waiting. After a while, she takes out a book and immerses herself in her reading. He returns.

Fred – What are you reading?

She jumps.

Alex – You scared me...

Fred – I'm sorry. So?

Alex – Oh, nothing special... Still no train in sight...

Fred – I was asking about your book.

Alex – Ah, yes... (*Showing him the book*) "Last Chance Encounter"...

Fred – Quite fitting.

Alex – It's a play...

Fred – Are you interested in theatre?

Alex – A bit. You've given up hitchhiking?

Fred – Well... no cars passing by at this hour. And besides...

Alex – Yes?

Fred – I didn't want to leave you alone.

Alex – Thanks, but... you didn't have to.

Fred – Hitchhiking is something I haven't done in years. I'm not very comfortable with it anymore.

Alex – Just raise your thumb, right?

Fred – Maybe for you, but for me. If I saw myself hitchhiking on the side of the road, I'm not sure I would stop. Would you stop?

She looks at him.

Alex – Honestly? No...

Fred – Then what's the point? I'd rather wait here... with you.

Alex – As you wish...

Fred – Looks like the weather's clearing up a bit, doesn't it?

Alex – Yes...

Fred – But I wouldn't want to keep you from reading...

Alex – Thank you.

She resumes her reading but doesn't seem very focused. Eventually, she puts her book away, and a silence falls.

Fred – What the hell are we doing out here in the middle of nowhere? I wonder...

Alex – I was at my mother's.

Fred – Sorry, that wasn't really a question. I didn't want to pry.

Alex – Sorry, I misunderstood. I'm telling you my life story...

A pause.

Fred – I was at my father's. (*Pointing in a direction*) He lives about a kilometre from here...

Alex – My mother doesn't live far either, on the other side. But I'd rather not go back there...

Fred looks at his watch.

Fred – 8:35. I still had hope that it was just running a little late. But no. They really cancelled it.

Alex – Hoping for a fresh start by taking a train that no longer exists...

Fred – What makes you think I want to start fresh?

Alex – Sorry, I was speaking for myself... I'm being intrusive.

She sits on the bench. He hesitates for a moment and sits down too.

Fred – On the other hand, if we're going to chat together for three hours while waiting for the next train... we won't be able to keep up with railway or weather-related topics.

Alex – We don't have to talk...

Fred – No, indeed.

Alex – Sorry, that's not what I meant, but... I'm not used to talking to strangers.

Fred – Your mother lives here. So does my father. Who knows, maybe we've met somewhere before.

Alex – And besides, it'll be good for me to talk to someone.

Fred – So, a new beginning. Today. On this train platform. At precisely 8:30...

Alex – You could put it that way, yes.

Fred – Leaving your mom...

Alex – Leaving my husband, rather. I'd moved back in with my mother while I looked for a new place to live. I've just got the keys.

Fred – The keys to freedom...

Alex – And what about you?

Fred – I came to say goodbye to my dad. Catching a flight to the United States tonight. Well, if I can ever manage to take off from this train station.

Alex – So, a fresh start for you too?

Fred – I quit my job. I gave back the keys to my flat. I'll be staying with a friend in Los Angeles for a while. After that, who knows?

Alex – Los Angeles... Seems like a long way from here...

Fred – Spent my whole childhood in these kinds of no man's land, stuck between two train stations with hardly any trains stopping by. Even back then, it felt like a long way from anywhere.

Alex – Yes...

Fred – And now that I'm off to discover America, here I am again, stranded on this quay like a sailor at low tide.

Alex – And the next tide is in three hours...

Fred – I don't really feel like going back to my dad either. I had to force myself to come and say farewell to my father, I don't want to go through that again.

Alex – Farewell?

Fred – I meant goodbye, of course. But maybe it was a revealing slip of the tongue...

A pause.

Alex – So we're both at a turning point in our lives...

Fred – Yes...

Alex – What were you doing before you decided to quit?

Fred – I was a marketing director in a computer company... (*A pause*) Yes, I know, it tends to bring conversations to an awkward halt. That's part of why I walked away. But what about you? What's your line of work?

Alex – I used to be a teacher... I took a leave of absence after getting married... My husband didn't want me to work. But now, I've just found a new job.

Fred – If I understand correctly, we don't exactly have the same idea of what a turning point is.

Alex – A turning point?

Fred – You said we're both at a turning point in our lives. I'm trying to change direction. From what you're sharing, it sounds more like a U-turn for you.

Alex – You think so?

Fred – You're becoming single again and going back to your old job. I'm quitting my job and embarking on an adventure...

Alex – That's one way of looking at it.

Fred – Do you truly believe you can pick up where you left off a few years ago? Go back to the crossroads and try a different path after getting stuck in a dead end?

Alex – What about you? Do you believe you can just leave everything behind and start a new life? Do you think changing continents is enough to become someone else?

Fred – I don't know... I can always try...

A pause.

Alex – So, you also used to live here when you were younger?

Fred – I spent my whole childhood here. I can't say it was filled with good memories. And you?

Alex – I had some good times here.

Fred – I was so bored in this dump as a teenager... I would sometimes take the 8:30 train, even on Sundays with no school, and come right back, taking the same train in the opposite direction.

Alex – Why did you do that?

Fred – To keep moving. To feel like I was still alive. I was already dreaming of trips to the ends of the earth, but I had to settle for these absurd round trips on a suburban line.

Alex – Now, you're going to travel...

Fred – If this train is willing to take me to the airport... Do you ever get bored?

Alex – No.

Fred – You must have a very intense inner life. It's an essential quality to live in a place like this. It's not a town, but it's not the countryside either. A few trains in the morning to go to school or work. A few trains in the evening to bring people back home, watch some TV before going to bed.

Alex – And now, you don't get bored anymore?

Fred – I do. Quite often, actually. But now, when I get bored, I've got options to entertain myself. I can go to the cinema. Hang out with friends. Escape for weekends getaways. You know, just to stave off boredom....

Alex – I've read that it's good for kids to experience boredom occasionally. It fosters their imagination.

Fred – Maybe spoiled children, when they're tired of all their toys... No, I'm not talking about temporary idleness. I mean that dreadful sensation when you realize your life is slipping away, and there's nothing to show for it. That haunting feeling that you won't be able to reclaim lost time.

Alex – So, by the age of fifteen, you already felt like you had missed out on your life?

Fred – Believe me, I nearly died of boredom... I hate this place... This stop was the only way to get away. The day I was able to take a one-way ticket... that was the happiest day of my life...

Alex – I don't perceive boredom the same way you do... I guess I must have been a spoiled child, as you say...

Fred – What's the happiest day of your life?

Alex – I don't know... Maybe today...

Fred – Because you took a one-way ticket...?

Alex – I don't even have a ticket... The machine is broken... And now that there's no ticket office...

Fred – I remember the lady who sold the tickets. Back in the day, she also managed the level crossing. She was a gatekeeper.

Alex – Gatekeeper?

Fred – She was in charge of ringing the bell and lowering the barrier every time a train arrived, with a big crank. Can you imagine the responsibility? It's a job that no longer exists...

Alex – I've never experienced that... But how old are you, actually?

Fred – My grandmother told me about it. Gatekeeper, can you imagine? She lived in a small house right next to the tracks. She must have seen countless trains pass by, day and night, without ever taking them. Nowadays, everything is automatic.. It must be tough to be replaced by a machine...

Alex – Because you lose your job, you mean?

Fred – Yes... But above all because you realise that all your life you've been doing work that a machine could have done.

A pause.

Alex – So you know that 8:30 train well.

Fred – I used to take it every day to go to high school.

Alex – Me too. We're about the same age. We could have been in the same class.

A pause.

Fred – We weren't in the same class, but we did go to the same high school.

Alex – Oh really?

Fred – And we took the same train every morning. The 8:30 train.

Alex – I don't remember...

Fred – Your name is Michelle, right?

She hesitates a bit before answering.

Alex – Yes...

Fred – Michelle Samson.

She seems to hesitate again.

Alex – That's my maiden name, yes...

Fred – So it's really you.

Alex – I'm sorry, I don't remember.

Fred – That's normal. You were always at the top with the math whizzes. I was in the trailing group, just ahead of the broom wagon.

Alex – The economics section...

Fred – The section for slackers. Not mathematician enough and not ambitious enough to be a doctor or an engineer, not literary or idealistic enough to be a teacher or a researcher.

Alex – So, I didn't really know you...

Fred – No.

Alex – But you knew me.

Fred – We used to cross paths on this platform. On the train. In the high school corridors. In the cafeteria...

Alex – And you knew my name.

Fred – Let's just say... I noticed you, and I did some digging.

Alex – You could have asked me my name... Did I impress you that much?

Fred – I was pretty shy back then... I'm a bit less shy now...

Alex – Or maybe I no longer impress you as much.

Fred – At that time, just striking up a conversation with you felt entirely impossible.

Alex – Why?

Fred – Even if I had found the courage to talk to you, what would be the use? How could you possibly be interested in someone like me?

Alex – Did you perceive me as arrogant?

Fred – Let's just say, more like unattainable.

Alex – So, you had a very high opinion of me.

Fred – And probably had a low opinion of myself. You were beautiful, intelligent...

Alex – If you hadn't used past tense, I might have taken it as a compliment.

Fred – To me, you were like an angel. And one doesn't sleep with an angel.

She is a little embarrassed.

Alex – Indeed, you seem much less shy now.

Fred – Maybe because I've stopped believing in angels.

Alex – That's a pity.

Fred – It's a survival strategy. If you still believe in angels after fifteen, you're not getting a good head start in life.

Alex – So you never dared to approach me...

Fred – When I used to take the 8:30 train alone on Sundays, it was always with the hope of meeting you. Hoping that for once, we would be the only two on the platform, just like today, and that you would finally acknowledge my presence.

Alex – So, if I get it right... you had feelings for me.

Fred – I was deeply in love with you. I never imagined having such a lengthy conversation with Michelle Samson.

A pause.

Alex – It's coming back to me now.

Fred – Sorry?

Alex – What's your name?

Fred – Anthony.

Alex – Anthony, right. I used to see you every morning on the platform. I often wondered why you never approached me.

Fred – Seriously?

Alex – I thought it was indifference. Or perhaps, disdain. You seemed... haughty.

Fred – Haughty?

Alex – Pretentious, if you prefer.

Fred – Right, haughty, I got it. I'm just surprised, that's all.

Alex – You were always reading *The Times* on the train.

Fred – It was a way to make myself feel important... and also to sneak glances at you over my newspaper without drawing too much attention.

Alex – All in all, it was a misunderstanding. I wasn't as angelic as that, and you weren't as pretentious as you seemed to be.

Fred – Life has its twists, doesn't it? In the end, we could have had a conversation. Found common ground. Dated. And today, we might be married...

Alex – And divorced...

Fred – Right before leaving high school behind, I finally mustered the courage to approach you, ready to risk making a fool of myself. Yet, a few months later, we wouldn't be living in the same town anymore. You were heading to study at some prestigious university...

Alex – But you didn't do it.

Fred – That's when you started dating Mark.

Alex – He didn't see me as an angel either...

Fred – Anyway, it wouldn't have worked. I put you on a pedestal. I don't think you would have appreciated that...

Alex – And here we are, fifteen years later, finally having a conversation...

Fred – And we find out that the 8.30 train won't be running, that we'll never have the chance to take it together again.

Alex – Well, there's still the 11:30 one.

Fred – Do you think it's that simple? You miss a train, you catch the next one...

Alex – Why not?

Fred – I told you earlier, I don't believe we can just pick up where we left off fifteen years ago. I'm not that pimply teenager who was in love with an angel anymore. And, I assume, you're not an angel anymore...

Alex – I've never been an angel. The girl you were in love with only existed in your imagination. The real Michelle is right in front of you, and she hasn't changed that much...

They draw closer, appearing on the brink of a kiss, when the sound of an approaching train becomes audible in the distance.

Alex – Do you think it's ours?

Fred – There's only one line anyway.

Alex – So maybe they didn't cancel it after all?

Fred – It seems so...

The noise grows louder, prompting both of them to turn towards the approaching train. As the sound reaches its peak, they fix their gaze ahead, as if the train were passing right in front of them. Slowly, the noise diminishes, fading away completely as the train moves farther into the distance.

Alex – It didn't stop.

Fred – It was a freight train...

Alex – Yes.

Fred – I'm getting thirsty, aren't you?

Alex – Not really.

Fred – Have you got anything to drink, by any chance?

Alex – I thought I was catching a train with a connection ten minutes later. Bringing a water bottle didn't cross my mind...

Silence.

Fred – Is Mark the one you married?

Alex – We dated for a few months. After high school, I never saw him again.

Fred – And you went to study at Oxford.

Alex – How did you find out?

Fred – I had inquired at the time.

Alex – I wanted to be a doctor, just like my father. After I graduated, I completely dropped out. Until then, I had always lived up to my parents' expectations — a diligent student, serious, perhaps too serious. I rarely went out. Sundays were dedicated to studying, leaving no room for boredom. My teenage crisis hit me much later in life...

Fred – So you didn't pursue medicine...

Alex – I quit after the first year. Couldn't imagine cramming for another ten years like that. I left Oxford and took the teaching exams.

Fred – And you married a teacher.

Alex – I married a dentist. A way for me not to disappoint my parents too much, I suppose... by maintaining a connection with the medical profession through marriage.

Fred – But it didn't work out.

Alex – It worked... for a few years.

Fred – Do you have kids?

Alex – Feels a bit like an interrogation.

Fred – You're right, I shouldn't pry into personal matters.

Alex – Never wanted any, especially not with him. That's actually why we split. Plus, he was cheating on me...

Fred – How can someone cheat on a woman like you?

Alex – By sleeping with another woman, plain and simple. What about you? Are you married?

Fred – No. And I don't have children either.

Alex – So you're... an IT specialist.

Fred – After high school, I was a bit lost. Ended up choosing computer studies. It didn't stick for long. They promised a job afterward, and that's exactly what happened.

Alex – But now, you're leaving for Los Angeles.

Fred – I could have stuck with it. Good pay, I enjoy the work, but it's not a passion. One day, I thought to myself... either I continue like this, and I'll wake up at retirement having experienced nothing, or I take a leap.

Alex – You're yearning to believe in angels once more.

Fred – Perhaps. Why Los Angeles, I couldn't tell you.

Alex – Probably because it means "the angels" in Spanish.

Fred – Never crossed my mind.

Alex – I hope you encounter one there.

Fred – In a few months, I might return home with my tail between my legs. I'll reach out to my old employer, see if they'd have me back. If not, there's always the employment agency... and maybe a dating site.

Alex – At least you will have tried, and you won't have any regrets...

Fred – You're still searching for an ideal too, aren't you?

Alex – I'm not leaving everything for a grand adventure, as you rightly pointed out.

Fred – Leaving your husband must be even more difficult.

Alex – Yes, perhaps...

Fred – And do you still believe in angels?

Alex – I don't know... You once saw me as an angel... If you've lost faith in me... Can I still find it in myself?

A moment of hesitation. They're inexplicably drawn to each other, sharing a passionate kiss. They quickly pull back, both feeling a bit embarrassed.

Fred – I never imagined I'd kiss Michelle Samson.

Alex – After over fifteen years of waiting... I hope you're not too disappointed...

Fred – How could it be? You're making one of my teenage dreams come true.

Alex – Reality begins where dreams end. And reality is always disappointing.

Fred – Are you a philosophy teacher?

Alex – No, I teach biology.

Fred – Biology?

Alex – I know... It's a bit like computer science, always causing an awkward silence in the conversation.

Fred – No, not at all... Well, okay, maybe a little. Truth is, I'm not even sure what biology entails exactly..

Alex – In comparison to philosophy, it's much more... grounded.

Fred – Yet, you still aspire to be a biology teacher again.

Alex – That's all I know how to do. However, you're right. You can't pick up where you left off years ago. When you miss a train, you catch the next one. Unfortunately, missed appointments...

Fred – So you believe it's too late for us as well?

Alex – Considering you're departing for the United States tonight...

Fred – What if you joined me?

Alex – Going away with a woman... I don't think that's the kind of adventure you have in mind...

Fred – I might reconsider leaving.

Alex – I don't want to ask you to give up on your dreams of adventure. Sooner or later, you'd blame me for it.

Fred – Nor would I ask you to give up on your dream of independence... You've just separated from your husband to be free.

Alex – That's true. At twenty-five, I moved out of my parents' house to live with my husband, so I've never experienced living alone. I just want to find out if I'm capable of it, you know?

Fred – It's making me think, were we really meant to meet? We cross paths again fifteen years after that missed appointment, and it still doesn't seem like the right moment...

Alex – Perhaps we'll cross paths once more in fifteen years on this same platform...

Fred – Or maybe it'll be fifty years from now, on the terrace of a retirement home.

Alex – But today, we will be going our separate ways.

Fred – In the meantime, we still have an hour to share... An hour of pure happiness...

Alex – It's like living an entire love story in just an hour, from our first encounter to the inevitable separation.

Fred – Whether it's an hour or a lifetime, does it really matter in the end? We might as well take each morning as a new birth and live as many lives as there are days in our existence.

Alex – And in the end, you might discover that I'm far from being an angel. Best to part ways with a good impression.

They share another kiss.

Fred – You're not Michelle Samson, are you?

Alex – No. Why? Did she kiss better than me?

Fred – I've never kissed her. But even in my dreams, she couldn't top your kisses. Why did you lie to me?

Alex – You seemed to care so much... I just didn't want to let you down. For a brief moment, I thought I could make your youthful dream come true...

Fred – Thank you.

Alex – I'm sorry. Maybe you'll find your Michelle someday. In this age of social networks...

Fred – Yes...

Alex – And there you have it... We've only known each other for an hour, and I've already disappointed you.

Fred – Yes... Well, I mean... No...

Alex – To be fair, you kind of set me up for it. Do I look so much like her?

Fred – Yes and no...

Alex – So how did you figure out that I wasn't Michelle Samson...

Fred – How? Well, firstly, on this train, I wasn't reading *The Times*; it was *New Musical Express*.

Alex – Yes, I got a bit carried away there, and I could sense it was a misstep. Improvisation isn't exactly my strong suit...

Fred – And mostly because... Michelle Samson doesn't exist.

Alex – Michelle Samson doesn't exist?

Fred – There might be a Michelle Samson out there... or several, it's a pretty common name. But personally, I've never come across any.

Alex – Okay...

Fred – There have been a lot of Michelle Samson for me. Girls who, at fifteen, made the shy teenager I was fantasise. Michelle Samson is all the girls I've been in love with and never dared to ask even their name.

Alex – So, we both lied.

Fred – Isn't it already a bit like the truth when two people want to believe in a lie?

Alex – Why Michelle? Because of the Beatles song?

Fred – Probably... It's the first name that came to my mind.

The Beatles song can be heard.

Alex – It's a beautiful song... But the lyrics are a bit silly, aren't they?

Fred – I don't think so... There is a lot of truth in popular songs, even the simplest ones. These lyrics have always moved me... Don't ask me why...

Alex – Why?

Fred – It talks about the passing of time... About youth that goes by too quickly... And with it, the childhood dreams...

Alex – So there's nothing true in our story.

Fred – I spent my childhood here, that's true.

Alex – So did I.

Fred – And I attended high school in the neighbouring town as well.

Alex – Just like me.

Fred – It's surprising we never crossed paths.

Alex – Perhaps we did without realising it...

Fred – Well, we certainly didn't connect, that's for sure..

Alex – I'm not surprised that you didn't notice me. Back then, I weighed almost two hundred pounds, my face was plagued with acne, glasses adorned my features, and my hair was constantly greasy...

Fred – I see...

Alex – I was far from the angelic image you paint. Ironically, with this falsehood, I fulfilled a teenage fantasy—to be the most beautiful girl in high school, the most sought after....

Fred – We are both liars... that's already something we share.

Alex – Do you really work in an IT company?

Fred – Indeed.

Alex – And are you really going to Los Angeles?

Fred – No... But I've entertained the thought from time to time...

Alex – Why did you tell me that?

Fred – Perhaps because I wish I had that courage. To drop everything and go off on an adventure... And because women like adventurers. And impossible love stories.

Alex – You think so?

Fred – Well, it seems to have worked, doesn't it?

Alex – Yes...

Fred – And what about you? Did you truly go through a divorce?

Alex – No... Well, not yet...

Fred – So, you're still married.

Alex – Yes.

Fred – You're still teaching biology.

Alex – Unfortunately.

Fred – Yes... It's like being an IT professional, not something you brag about.

Alex – No.

Fred – So we both invented a fresh start for ourselves.

Alex – Yet here we are, both still stuck at the platform...

Fred – What if we took off anyway?

Alex – Together? It might feel too much like a honeymoon.

Fred – You're right, there's nothing less adventurous than a honeymoon.

Alex – And don't forget, I'm still married...

Fred – Can I share one last secret?

Alex – Sure, go ahead.

Fred – I knew there was no train at 8:30.

Alex – Then why were you on the platform at 8:25?

Fred – I was driving by, I saw you walking towards the station, dragging your suitcase. I figured you were aiming for that train that's no longer running.

Alex – And then?

Fred – I parked my car, took my bag, and joined you on the platform.

Alex – You could have offered me a ride in your car.

Fred – You wouldn't have accepted... and I wouldn't have had the pleasure of spending three hours with you.

Alex – Can I share you a secret too?

Fred – I'm listening.

Alex – I was aware that the train no longer existed.

Fred – Then why wait for it?

Alex – I had an argument with my mother, precisely about my divorce. She insisted I was to blame, and I just couldn't bear to stay there another minute.

Fred – Got it...

Alex – And I saw you parking your car...

Fred – So there's nothing true about this story at all.

Alex – Except, perhaps, the genuine desire we both had to meet each other...

A train can be heard approaching.

Fred – Ah, this time, here comes our train...

Alex – Already?

Fred – Yes, I didn't realise how time flew by.

Alex – The 11:30 train. I don't think I've ever taken that one.

Fred – Let's take it together!

Alex – You told me you came by car...

Fred – Yes, but I've always dreamt of taking the train with you.

Alex – I don't have a ticket...

He takes out two tickets and shows them to her.

Fred – I'm inviting you.

Alex – Well then, let's go!

Blackout.

Lights up.

The same platform. He is there, waiting and reading a book. She arrives. Neither of them has any luggage.

Alex – There's no more train at 8:30... Have you already forgotten?

Fred – No.

Alex – Then what are you waiting for?

Fred – You, maybe...

Alex – Me?

Fred – If another passenger were to come, it would have to be you.

They wait together, without looking at each other.

Alex – How's your brother?

Fred – My brother?

Alex – The one who lost a shoe on the tracks... and without your heroic rescue, would've been crushed by a train as he turned back to get it.

Fred – Ah yes... that one...

Alex – You've got more than one brother or something?

Fred – I'm an only child.

Alex – So there was a hidden message in that parable.

Fred – When you leave something behind, you should never go back to search for it. At least, that's what I used to think until now...

Alex – Anthony isn't your real name, is it?

Fred – No.

Alex – Then I don't even know your name.

Fred – How would you like to call me?

She pretends to think.

Alex – Fred?

Fred – Why not? One of your youthful loves?

Alex – No, but it just feels right for you. And what name do you have for me today?

He thinks for a moment.

Fred – Alex.

Alex – Then, for you, I will be Alex. At least for this performance...

Fred – Do you think there will be others?

Alex – As many as we like. As many as there are days in a year. And as many as there are trains on this line. After all, we are storytellers.

Fred – Actors, more like it. Even as a kid, I'd weave these unbelievable tales. My father used to tease, "What an actor he is." Not sure it was a compliment, but that's likely when my passion took root.

Alex – For me, my mother always used to say, "Lying is an ugly trait." So, for the longest time, I tried to shape myself into what others perceived as my truth.

Fred – Lying is the best option for those who don't want to settle for a single truth.

Alex – And when you turn lying into a profession, you end up either a fraud or an actor. What are you reading?

Fred shows his book to Alex.

Fred – "Last Chance Encounter" It's the book you were reading when we first met.

A pause.

Alex – How much time has passed...?

Fred – It seemed like an eternity to me.

Alex – I feel like it was just yesterday.

Fred – Yesterday...?

Alex – Maybe a year ago...

Fred – So, it's some sort of anniversary.

Alex – Indeed. The first anniversary of when we first met.

Fred – And our separation...

Alex – That's true, I haven't seen you since.

Fred – In the end, I went to Los Angeles.

Alex – But you came back...

Fred – There are no angels in Los Angeles. At least, I haven't encountered any.

Alex – Did your boss take you back?

Fred – I didn't ask him.

Alex – Yet, you joined a dating site...

Fred – When it comes to encounters, I lean towards more unconventional platforms.

Alex – Such as train platforms...

Fred – And preferably when no train is announced.

Alex – So you're no longer working in IT.

Fred – I'm unemployed for the first time in my life. It's an enlightening experience. Shows you who you can truly count on around you...

Alex – I'm sure you've got plans.

Fred – I've signed up for a drama school.

Alex – A drama school?

Fred – I did some theatre in high school. The idea took root in Los Angeles. I didn't feel ready for Hollywood yet, so I came back here and joined a theatre school.

Alex – You see, it's never too late to find your true calling. Did you return to this neighbourhood?

Fred – For the time being, I'm staying with my father. When you decide to relive your childhood, you have to make some compromises... What about you?

Alex – I followed your advice. I got divorced.

Fred – I don't recall giving you any specific advice. But I'd be lying if I said I felt sorry about the divorce.

Alex – I also went back to studying.

Fred – Medicine?

Alex – Theatre.

Fred – Seriously?

Alex – Maybe in the same school as you.

Fred – Then we'll likely cross paths.

Alex – We'll meet on this platform, at least.

Fred – Don't tell me you've moved back in with your mother too!

Alex – Did you really go to Los Angeles?

Fred – You were right. No need to go to the ends of the earth to find yourself. It's better to retrace your steps and figure out where you got lost.

Alex – Yes, maybe...

Fred – Did you really get divorced?

Alex – I've never been married.

Fred – We're finally going to make our dream come true. Taking the train to school together.

Alex – Yes... A drama school.

Fred – Perhaps one day, we'll act in the same play.

Alex – The one you'll write?

Fred – We can write it together.

Alex – Why not?

Fred – Will you give me your number then...?

Alex – Maybe a fake number? A theatre number...

Fred – Otherwise, we'll keep depending on fate...

She walks towards him and embraces him.

Alex – I've decided not to leave things to chance anymore.

Fred – You're right... It's less romantic, but safer.

He kisses her. In the distance, the sound of an approaching train is heard.

Fred – Seems like it's finally arriving...

Alex – The 8:30 train? I thought it was no longer in service...

Fred – Yes, it's strange...

She looks at him. They share a smile. The sound of the approaching train grows louder. Then it fades away, returning to silence.

Alex – We didn't see any train go by...

Fred – Still, we heard it distinctly.

Alex – A ghost train...?

Fred – The ghost of the 8:30 train.

Alex – I thought I saw a shadow behind the ticket office I arrived.

Fred – The gatekeeper...

Alex – It's weird.

Fred – Very weird.

Alex – At the same time, it's not exactly a train station...

Fred – No. It's more like...

Alex – A theatre stage.

He shows her his book.

Fred – Do you know your lines?

Alex – By heart. And you?

Fred – I still make mistakes from time to time.

Alex – Me too...

Silence. Each of them immerses themselves in their book titled "Last Chance Encounter". Fred interrupts first.

Fred – You know what I love most about the theatre? When we're in the audience, I mean...

Alex – The relief when the curtain finally falls, signalling the end of the ordeal?

Fred – No.

Alex – The intermission, giving us the chance to escape if the show turns out to be a bore?

Fred – No, it's that moment right before the lights go down and the show begins. We're in the auditorium, filled with anticipation. We have no idea what's coming, and our imaginations run wild. It feels like we're about to embark on a wonderful journey.

Alex – Even though we're likely to be bored for a good two hours most of the time.

Fred – At the start, life unfolds like a play when the curtain rises.

Alex – We explore the stage. We have no idea what's going to happen. But nothing can stop us from hoping.

Fred – That's why we often feel nostalgic for our childhood; it's the era of boundless possibilities.

Alex – Even if that childhood was marked by unhappiness, and we found great happiness later on?

Fred – Even a prosperous life is, in a way, a surrender — a relinquishment of all the other potential lives we could have led. Do you know what I hate the most about the theatre?

Alex – The six-foot-tall guy who decides to sit right in front of you at the last minute?

Fred – No.

Alex – The overweight lady who arrives late and forces an whole row of spectators to stand up because she wants to sit right in the middle?

Fred – And those folks who choose the first lines of the play to power down their mobile phones instead of doing it a few minutes before the curtain rises.

Alex – Yes... It's like waiting until the moment the priest offers you the host at mass to take your chewing gum out of your mouth.

Fred – I hadn't thought of that analogy, but yes, the theatre is like a communion. Before the lights illuminate and the performance starts, we all crave a moment of stillness to shed our daily routines, hoping that fiction will outshine reality.

Alex – Theatre is to reality what desire is to love. A promise we know will not be fulfilled, but that, in the meantime, thrills you.

Fred – Hence, let's postpone as much as we can the instant when the curtain lifts on our love.

Silence.

Alex – Who are you truly?

Fred – Your partner, if you don't mind.

He takes her by the shoulder and she leans towards him.

Alex – Do you want to play with me...?

Fred – As soon as the lights go out. Are you ready?

Alex – My phone is on airplane mode.

Fred – Mine too.

Alex – Then let it start.

Fred – Lights off!

Lights off.

The end

About the author

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

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

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

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

A Cuckoo's nest

A simple business dinner

An innocent little murder

Best and Breakfast

Casket for two

Cheaters

Check to the kings

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but stable

Euro Star

Four stars

Fragile, handle with care

Friday the 13th

Heads or Tails

Him and Her

Is there a pilot in the audience?

Is there an author in the audience?

Just a moment before the end of the world

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

New Year's Eve at the Morgue

One marriage out of two

Preliminaries

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

Surviving Mankind

The Perfect Son-in-Law

The Smell of Money

The Window across the courtyard

The Worst Village in England

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