La Comédiathèque

At the Bar Counter

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Translation by the author

At the bar counter, looking back over her life, a woman who calls herself a writer shares some of her defining experiences with the woman who runs the bar. Her fanciful recollections come to life around them.

Eighteen characters appear, all played as women in this version, although the number and gender of performers can be varied considerably.

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Two women enter a bar. They look around and approach the counter rather hesitantly. Behind it, the owner stands impassively, polishing wine glasses.

One – What are you having?

Two – I don't know... A glass of wine?

One – Red or white?

Two – Red...

One – Two glasses of red, please.

Owner – House red?

One – Is it any good?

Owner – It's red.

The owner pours their wine.

One – Let's find a table while there are still some free...

Two – All right.

They sit at a table. The first woman takes a sip and grimaces.

One – I'm not sure we made the right choice...

Two – The show?

One – The wine, for a start...

The second woman tastes hers.

Two – You're right. It's not exactly a fine vintage...

One – What exactly have we come to see?

Two – I'm not entirely sure... *(She takes a flyer from her pocket.)* "Open Mic at the Bar". Free admission. I thought it was a comedy night...

One – Comedy?

Two – Stand-up, perhaps.

One – I could do with a laugh.

Two – At least we've got the front row to ourselves.

One – Let me see... *(She reads the flyer.)* Hang on. Here, in small print: "An evening of contemporary poetry."

Two – An evening of what?

One – Poetry. Poems. People reading them aloud. Oh, hell.

Two – You're joking! *(She snatches the flyer and reads it again.)* Oh no. You're right!

One – We came for a laugh. Looks like the joke's on us.

Two – No wonder it was free...

A musical transition. A woman arrives. Before entering, she takes one last drag on her cigarette.

One – And now it's too late to escape...

The customer stubs out her cigarette, glances around the room and begins to recite.

Customer –

At the counter, the smokers have scattered,
their crumpled packets cast aside.
Two cigarette ends left on the counter
still carry the scent of yesterday.
Smoke has dissolved into steam.
The coffee machine gives a weary sigh.
Black coffee has replaced white wine.
Nothing burns here any more
except the bitter taste of coffee.

The two women at the table stare at her in bewilderment.

Two – Bravo! That was... Yes, very original.

One – It's certainly different...

Customer – Thank you...

Two – And... do you know many more like that?

Customer – Quite a few.

One – Oh, shit... I mean, wonderful...

Customer – Would you like another?

One – Oh, why not? Though I think I'll try a different wine this time.

Customer – I meant another poem.

Two – Oh. Of course...

One – We'd love one! *(Aside)* Poetry. It's an ambush.

Two – We really should get out of here...

As the two women slip out discreetly, the customer recites:

Customer –

On the counter, a few forgotten glasses.
Tonight, a handful of verses keep me company.
Outside, fog hangs over the grieving streets,
while a banished smoker lights up in the dark.

She goes up to the counter.

Owner – What can I get you?

Customer – I don't know... I don't feel like anything...

Owner – Nothing? Sorry, we don't serve that here.

Customer – I feel like throwing myself under a train.

Owner – Wrong place, I'm afraid. I don't run a railway station. If you want to stay, you'll have to order something.

Customer – All right... A beer. When you're feeling suicidal, a beer seems appropriate, don't you think?

Owner – What kind?

Customer – Something called "Sudden Death".

Owner – Nothing quite that dramatic.

Customer – What have you got?

Owner – Beer on tap.

Customer – What kind of beer?

Owner – The usual kind.

Customer – Is that it?

Owner – A moment ago you didn't know what you wanted. Now there isn't enough choice?

Customer – An ordinary draught will be fine.

Owner – People don't come here for the beer, you know. They have beer in their own fridges.

Customer – You're right. They must come for a little human warmth...

Owner – Well, we keep the beer cold.

Customer – Half a pint, then. No, make it two...

The owner pours two half-pints.

Owner – Here you are. Two halves.

Customer – Two halves make a whole. At least that's what they taught us at school...

Owner – You're a funny one. Are you waiting for somebody?

Customer – If I were waiting for my other half, I'd be sitting at a table, making myself look presentable. I wouldn't be standing here, hair all over the place, talking to myself.

Owner – Thank you.

The customer pushes the second half-pint towards the owner.

Customer – You're different... *(They clink glasses.)* A bar owner is rather like a therapist or a priest. You can tell them everything, but you mustn't ask them anything. Especially whether they have problems with their mothers or ever have terrible thoughts themselves...

Owner – Have you got problems with your mother?

Customer – Do you ever have terrible thoughts?

Owner – That's none of your business!

Customer – You see?

Owner – Did you come looking for trouble?

Customer – I came looking for inspiration.

Owner – Oh, really?

Customer – Poets have always come to bars for inspiration. Didn't you know?

Owner *(dryly)* – Of course. Every one of my customers is a poet.

Customer – Apparently two bars close every day in this country. I read it in the paper this morning.

Owner – I don't read newspapers.

Customer – But you sell them!

Owner – I sell pipes too. I don't smoke.

Customer – Where will poets find inspiration when every bar has been replaced by a fast-food restaurant?

Owner – They can go to hell.

Customer – One day even the sound of a boiled egg being tapped against a bar counter will vanish. And with it, the poetry of places like this.

Owner – We stopped serving boiled eggs years ago. Nobody noticed.

Customer – Believe me, once every street corner has a fast-food restaurant, poets will end up writing disposable fiction.

Owner – Is that why you want to throw yourself under a train?

Customer – Or perhaps I'm afraid I'll never find anything to write about.

Owner – You really think you'll find a story in here?

Customer – If counters could talk, they'd have plenty of stories, wouldn't they?

Owner – I'm sure they would. But who'd want to listen?

Customer – I heard the results of my final exams in a bar just like this one.

Owner – You don't say.

Customer – Exams, driving tests... They're milestones in life, aren't they? Rites of passage.

Owner – I crossed a river on a ferry when I first left home. As for qualifications, the only certificate I expect to earn is my death certificate.

Customer – I could tell you about my life. Or yours?

Owner – You can get paid for telling people your life story? My customers do it for nothing.

Customer – Not very much...

Owner – Peanuts?

Customer – More or less.

Owner – No, I mean, would you like some peanuts with your beer?

The light shifts to one of the tables, where two young women are sitting. They look through the window on the audience's side.

One – What the hell are all those pigeons doing out there?

Two *(distracted)* – What?

One – The pigeons! Why do they all live in cities? *(The other seems occupied by something else entirely.)* They're not pets, like dogs or cats. They're birds. They're free. No cages. They can fly. Why don't they just go away?

Two – Where would they go?

One – I don't know. The countryside. Why don't all those pigeons fly off to the countryside?

Two – The countryside? They wouldn't find anything to eat.

One – Watching them makes me feel sick.

Two *(distracted)* – Yeah...

One – Look, they're coprophagous.

Two – They're what?

One – Haven't you seen what they're eating?

Two – What?

One – Dog shit.

Two *(glancing over without much interest)* – Oh, right...

One – Isn't that what they call an ecosystem?

Two – Why stay here eating shit when they could be eating cherries in the countryside?

One – Cherries don't grow all year round. *(Her phone rings. She answers.)* Yeah... Yeah... Yeah... Okay.

She hangs up.

Two – Well?

One – The results aren't out yet.

Two – What if we've failed?

One – I'd rather not think about it. Why would we have failed?

Two – Fear of success. Like a champion horse refusing the last jump. It happens to the best of them.

One – We're not horses. Besides, school-leaving exams aren't a competition. It's like a driving test. Other people passing doesn't make you any less likely to pass.

Two – That's what worries me. I've failed my driving test twice already... Do you ever think about what happens when we die?

One – What?

Two – When we die!

One – I'm trying not to think about failing, if you don't mind.

Two – In mythology, the dead had to cross a river in a boat to reach the other world.

One – And what's that got to do with our exams?

Two – Nothing. Except that right now I feel as though I'm stuck on the wrong bank.

One – If I fail, I really will be dead. My parents will kill me. They put me in an expensive private school because everyone passes. It costs them a fortune. If I don't give them their money's worth... And why would the dead need a boat? Can't they swim?

Two – Some years the pass rate has been ninety-nine per cent. That means somebody must fail occasionally. Rare, but possible.

One – Perhaps that one student missed the exam. Missed the bus. Or missed the boat, if you prefer.

Two – Stop it. You'll jinx us.

One – How?

Two – We haven't crossed the river yet.

One – You're still going on about that boat?

Two – I'm trying not to think about the alternative.

The phone rings. The first woman answers at once.

One – Yeah... Yeah... Yeah... Okay...

She hangs up, her face unreadable.

Two – Well?

One – They've just posted the results.

Two *(paralysed with fear)* – And?

Unable to keep up the pretence, the first woman bursts out laughing with joy.

One – We've passed! Bloody hell, we've passed!

They throw their arms around each other.

Two – You scared the life out of me! My heart must be beating a hundred times an hour!

One – A minute, you mean. At a hundred an hour, you'd already be dead.

Two – What grades did we get?

One – Passing is enough of a miracle. Don't push your luck. Oh God, we'll have to celebrate!

Two – Yes... Although these days almost everyone passes.

One – And that's when the trouble begins.

Two – That's why I can't stop thinking about the river of the dead.

One – What river?

Two – The one you cross to reach the underworld.

One – Forget mythology. You'll never have to see that teacher again! Wow, I'm boiling. I feel like jumping into the river.

Two – Me too. I feel like throwing myself in.

One – Life is wonderful! It's summer!

Two – You're right. Let's plunge into the river of forgetfulness.

They leave. Back at the counter.

Owner – So, did you pass?

Customer – Just scraped through.

Owner – Your parents must have been pleased.

Customer – They didn't say anything.

Owner – Some people aren't very talkative.

Customer – Just once in my life, I'd have liked my parents to say they were proud of me. Even if they didn't mean it. Wouldn't you?

Owner – I'd have liked to be able to tell my parents I was proud of them...

Customer – Do you have children?

Owner – No. And I'm not sure they'd have been proud of me either.

Customer – Why not?

Owner – So you didn't throw yourself in the river?

Customer – I should have. That's when the trouble really started.

Owner – Couldn't you find work?

Customer – I did. A little job, as they call it.

Owner – Better than working on the street.

Customer – I'm not sure... Leaving school is the end of innocence, but your first job is like losing your virginity. That's when you discover you're truly screwed. The first time hurts, and then you get used to it. Though you suspect it'll take a lot of imagination ever to enjoy it... How was it for you?

Owner – Losing my virginity?

Customer – Your first job! What did you do before you became your own boss?

Owner – I was a prostitute.

Customer – Ah. So you know what I mean.

The light shifts to the second table. A businesswoman is waiting there. A blonde young woman, dressed like a student, arrives.

Woman – Do sit down... *(Slightly surprised)* You're Miss...?

Young – Ben Salah. Fatima Ben Salah.

Woman – Yes, of course... And you're blonde.

Young – So I've been told. It's my great-grandfather's fault, apparently... Usually employers find it reassuring. When I actually get as far as an interview, that is. Is there a problem?

Woman – Not at all...

Young – Your advertisement said you were looking for a salesperson?

Woman – We sell funeral plans. It's a crowded market, and we need someone to go door to door in the poorer neighbourhoods.

Young – So why not a blonde?

Woman – Going door to door in certain neighbourhoods... We thought customers might find it harder to identify with a blonde.

Young *(handing her a sheet of paper)* – I have a criminal record, you know! I mean, a CV...

Woman – You need a special talent to sell this sort of thing. When people are wondering how they'll pay next month's rent, they don't wake up thinking of taking out a fifty-year loan to pay for their final resting place.

Young – True.

Woman – We started in publishing. That wasn't easy either. Trying to sell a twenty-eight-volume encyclopaedia to people who couldn't read.

Young – Encyclopaedias do have pictures...

Woman – Then we tried supplementary health insurance, but the competition was fierce. No, funeral plans are still a growing business. That's where the future lies.

Young – Not everyone gets ill. But everyone dies eventually. Even people who can't read.

Woman – This isn't some kind of discrimination test, is it?

Young – Sorry?

Woman – You haven't dyed your hair blonde just so you can accuse us of discrimination afterwards?

Young – Don't worry. I'm a natural blonde.

Woman – We're not racist, you understand. It's just that we were hoping to develop a new market. What we call, in the trade, the "halal funeral plan". A rapidly growing sector, thanks to several generations of immigration.

Young – I could put on an Arabic accent...

Woman – You could?

Young – With a little practice.

Woman – You think it would work?

Young – And wear traditional clothes...

The woman considers this.

Woman – Well, you've convinced me. When you apply for a sales job, the first thing you have to sell is yourself. And selling me a blonde wasn't going to be easy! *(Getting to her feet.)* Congratulations. You're hired on a trial basis.

Young – Thank you.

Woman – If all goes well, after three months we'll offer you a permanent contract.

Young – With a basic salary?

Woman *(smiling with satisfaction)* – Wonderful to see a young person who's still willing to work!

They leave. Back at the counter.

Owner – You haven't come here to sell me a funeral plan, I hope. If you have, save your breath. I intend to be cremated and leave my ashes to science.

Customer – No, don't worry. I never managed to sell a single funeral plan. You need more than sales skills for that, believe me. You need faith.

Owner – You don't believe in God?

Customer – Does God believe in us?

Owner – So what came next? Did you join a convent?

Customer – I found a proper job.

Owner – A job for a blonde.

Customer – Exactly.

Owner – That didn't work out either.

Customer – I don't think I was made for corporate life.

Owner – You don't exactly look like a fighter.

Customer – I thought I'd get used to it. Accept my lot.

Owner – I understand. I could never have worked for a boss.

Customer – I never could accept it. Selling funeral plans wasn't for me, and neither was taking orders.

Owner – Having nobody telling you what to do and nobody you have to tell what to do... The moment you employ people, you become their slave.

Customer – Even when you were working on the street, you didn't have a boss?

Owner – Only Mary Magdalene. At least she never asked for a percentage.

Customer – I couldn't stand being told what to do either. How to dress... or undress.

The lights return to one of the tables. A smartly dressed executive in jeans is sitting there. She takes a catalogue from her briefcase and leafs through it as she drinks her coffee. Her phone rings; she answers.

Executive – Hello? Oh, yes... Yes, I'm waiting for you. No, I think I'm a little early. What time exactly were we meeting?

Her manager arrives, in a business suit, with a phone pressed to her ear. She is so highly strung she might be on stimulants. She sits at the same table.

Manager – Ten forty-five. Have you brought the visuals for the new campaign?

They continue speaking on their phones as if they weren't sitting opposite each other.

Executive – Of course. You'll see, they're excellent...

The executive turns the page. Her manager takes the catalogue from her and studies it.

Manager – Oh, yes. It's...

Executive – A change, isn't it?

Manager – Yes...

Executive – The creative team have done a really good job.

Manager – For once, they've managed to be creative.

The executive seems to notice her manager sitting opposite her for the first time, and realises how ridiculous their phone conversation is.

Executive – Would you like a coffee?

Looking up from the catalogue, the manager seems to notice her too.

Manager – No, thanks. I've given up coffee. It stains my teeth and makes me want to pee.

She examines the executive, puzzled by something about her appearance.

Manager – Aren't you wearing a bra?

Executive – Er... No. Is that a problem?

Manager – No, no... But you usually wear one, don't you?

Executive – Well, it's Friday. I thought I'd dress more casually.

Manager – More casually?

Executive – Casual Friday. You know?

Manager – Casual Friday?

Executive – Some companies let their employees dress less formally on Fridays. Smart, but relaxed.

Manager – Really?

Executive – Without a bra.

Manager *(disconcerted)* – Right...

An awkward silence.

Executive – May I be frank with you?

Manager *(anxiously)* – I'm beginning to think I preferred it when you wore a bra.

Executive – Our company has a rather stiff image, and our customers know it. Every survey says we're old-fashioned. I thought that, with the new catalogue, if we embraced Casual Friday, we'd seem more... up to date.

The manager is taken aback. After a moment's hesitation, she makes up her mind.

Manager – Well... you're absolutely right. Why not?

She turns her back to the audience, wriggles for a moment, then turns around holding her bra aloft.

Manager – There. That's what I call embracing change.

The executive looks surprised.

Manager *(relieved)* – Oh, that's better. I can breathe again. Do I look more relaxed?

Executive – Much more relaxed.

Manager – Next time I'll take my knickers off too...

But the manager still looks uneasy.

Manager – Though isn't it a little awkward? Considering our client, I mean...

Executive – Why would it be?

Manager – Well... Bras are what they sell, aren't they?

Executive – Oh! Right... But it's only on Fridays.

The manager seems resigned.

Manager *(relaxing)* – Well, I still have to take you to meet the client... *(Pleased with her own joke.)* Like a farmer taking a cow to the bull.

The executive looks rather bewildered. They stand up to leave.

Manager – Who are we meeting again?

Executive – The new chief executive.

Manager – The new one?

Executive – Her predecessor killed herself last Friday. Hadn't you heard?

Manager – Good heavens, no... What a strange idea.

Executive – She hanged herself from the coat hook in her office. With a bra strap, as it happens.

Manager – Well, the bra was certainly well made. Fancy supporting all that weight... Remind me to send our branch manager a suicide-prevention kit along with her share options.

The executive is surprised, and rather disturbed, by her manager's casual reaction.

Manager – I'm joking. I thought we were being relaxed today.

They leave. Back at the counter.

Customer – Of course, we lost the client.

Owner – And did you put your bra back on for the next meeting?

Customer – No. I resigned. I went travelling round the world, and when I got back I bought a lottery ticket.

Owner – Most people do it the other way round.

Customer – Yes, but I wasn't prepared to make the trip depend on a lottery win. People buy houses and cars on credit, after all.

Owner – Governments spend money they haven't got. Why shouldn't the rest of us?

Customer – Exactly. I decided to spend my winnings in advance, just in case I didn't win. Have you ever travelled round the world?

Owner – No. And it's like the pipes: I sell lottery tickets, but I never buy them.

Customer – So you're a dealer in dreams.

Owner – Believe me, the poorer people are, the more they need something to dream about.

Customer – When I was little, there was a joke shop near our house called "Children's Happiness". I used to pass it every day on my way to school, looking in the window, but I couldn't afford to buy anything. I learned very early that even when happiness is a joke, you have to be able to afford it.

The light returns to one of the tables. Two women are sitting there. The second is staring straight ahead.

Woman 1 – What are you looking at?

Woman 2 – Waiting for the lottery results. They'll put them up on that screen in a minute.

Woman 1 – You play the lottery?

Woman 2 – I felt like giving it a go.

Woman 1 – Why not? *(A pause.)* How much is the jackpot?

Woman 2 – A hundred and fifteen million.

Woman 1 – A hundred and fifteen million...

Woman 2 – Trying to work out how many lifetimes of wages that is?

Woman 1 – Beyond a certain number, it stops meaning anything. If somebody tells you a star is a hundred and fifteen million light-years away, you don't start converting that into miles or kilometres.

Woman 2 – Or how much fuel you'd need to get there in your little car.

Woman 1 – Which numbers did you choose?

Woman 2 – My ID number. And the amount of my last unemployment payment.

Woman 1 – Fortune favours the bold... Imagine if we won.

Woman 2 – I can hardly imagine it.

Woman 1 – No more getting up for work on Mondays. Three hundred and sixty-five days off a year!

Woman 2 – Yes... Walking away from everything.

Woman 1 – Everything? *(The second is staring at the screen.)* What would you do if you had a hundred and fifteen million right now? Well, fifty-seven and a half million. *(The second looks at her.)* We're a couple, aren't we? For better or worse.

Woman 2 – I don't know. Win ten thousand and you're pleased. You treat yourself to something, but your life doesn't really change. A hundred and fifteen million is different. There's a before and an after. Suddenly you're a different person. It's like being born again. Almost frightening.

Woman 1 – First I'd tell my boss exactly what I think of him. Then I'd go out and buy a car bigger than his. Winning the lottery is one way of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat... one person at a time.

Woman 2 – It must be a shock, though. Suddenly there are no limits to what you want. No restrictions. You can do anything. Absolutely anything...

Woman 1 – I think I could cope.

Woman 2 – I'm not sure. Just look at all those lottery winners who end up completely broke.

Woman 1 – If the worst thing that can happen when you win the lottery is that you end up broke, you've not got much to lose.

Woman 2 – And all the divorces... Do you think we'd survive it as a couple?

Silence.

Woman 1 – Then again, I wonder. How do you give meaning to the life of a multimillionaire when it drops into your lap overnight?

Woman 2 – Do you think billionaires' daughters ask themselves those philosophical questions?

Woman 1 – They were born rich. They've had time to get used to it. They know nothing else. A lottery win hits you all at once. One chance in twenty million. Imagine that.

Woman 2 – There are roughly three hundred million sperm cells in one ejaculation.

Woman 1 – And?

Woman 2 – So if we're both here, we're already extraordinarily lucky. We didn't choose our working-class lives either; they happened by chance. The lottery is like giving the draw a second chance to correct fate's mistake of not giving us wealthy parents.

Woman 1 – I don't know. I find that a bit frightening. It suggests that our life now is worth nothing. That it hasn't been worth living. Is that what you think? Is that why you play? Because you think our life is worthless?

Woman 2 – What are you talking about? I've only played once. It's just a bit of fun.

Woman 1 – Most winners are first-time players. Beginner's luck, they call it.

Suddenly they both look almost anxious.

Woman 2 *(tense)* – They're about to announce the numbers.

They stare, transfixed, at the draw.

Woman 1 – Well?

Woman 2 *(checking her ticket)* – Not one correct number! There must be odds against that too. I can't remember enough statistics to tell you what they are.

Woman 1 – So in a way, we were lucky.

They exchange a knowing look and a tender gesture.

Woman 2 – And to think we could have lost all this happiness in a moment.

Woman 1 – It doesn't bear thinking about.

Back to the owner and the customer at the counter.

Customer – I've never been lucky. I've never won anything, not even a raffle prize. I wasn't asking for the jackpot. A consolation prize would have done.

Owner – But you've never had a really bad blow either.

Customer – True. I can't say I've been particularly unlucky either. An ordinary life. A bare pass. No great happiness, no great sorrow. Neither a fairy tale nor a tragedy. Nothing catastrophic, but nothing dazzling either.

Owner – And you left her anyway?

Customer – She left me.

Owner – She? *(The other says nothing.)* Oh. I see.

Customer – We'd known each other since we were children. Back then, our classes were all girls. Though I doubt that explains very much.

Owner – A vegetarian in a butcher's shop is still a vegetarian.

Customer – She was my first love. But childhood sweethearts seldom last much longer than the final exams or the driving test.

Owner – If it's real love, it's for life, isn't it?

Customer – Childhood love lasts for ever. Childhood doesn't.

The light returns to one of the tables.

Two women are looking out into the distance. The second wears a close-fitting hat, with no hair showing beneath it.

One – Look at that tree. Isn't it beautiful?

Two *(indifferently)* – Yeah.

One – It's such a part of the landscape we've stopped noticing it.

Two – Mmm.

One – It's an oak. It was here long before either of us was born.

Two – How do you know? We weren't born.

One – We hung a swing from one of its branches when we were little. It was just as big then. Don't you remember?

Two – No.

One – I do. I broke my arm falling off that damned swing.

Two – You've broken so many things, how am I supposed to remember? You even managed to break your backside once.

One – My coccyx.

Two – Falling off a chair! Unbelievable. I wonder if there's a bone you haven't fractured. *(A pause.)* Coccyx. I didn't even know it existed then. I'm not entirely sure how to spell it now.

One – All I know is it's worth a fortune in Scrabble.

Two – Whenever I picture you as a child, you're in plaster. Even in school photographs, you've always got an arm in a sling, a pair of crutches or an enormous bandage. It's a miracle you've made it this far in one piece.

One – You never broke anything. Just like that tree.

Two – I was just as reckless as you. I've lived dangerously too. I've even opened oysters at a family dinner. And I've never stabbed myself in the hand with the knife.

One – You've always been luckier than me. I've often resented you for that.

Two – Do you really think I'm the lucky one?

One – All right, call me clumsy.

Two – Where are you going with this tree of yours?

One – It's survived every storm. Not a broken branch. Just like you. A hundred years from now it'll still be standing there.

Two – It may be standing, but perhaps it's rotting inside. Look. There's not a single leaf left on it. Just like me.

One – That's normal. It's autumn.

Two – Oh, of course. I missed the whole summer. My hospital window looked out onto a supermarket car park.

One – The leaves will grow back in spring. You'll see.

A pause.

Two – Do you think my hair will grow back in spring too?

One *(holding out her hand)* – You have my word.

Back to the owner and the customer at the counter.

Owner – It's hard watching people you love go. But do you know what upsets me most?

Customer – No.

Owner – Watching my neighbours get old.

Customer – I see.

Owner – You think one day they'll die, and other people will move in. Young people. They can be noisy. You never know who you'll end up with... Still, we're here. For now.

Customer – Yes. And I realised that if I didn't want to die without having understood anything, this was my last chance to give some meaning to the life I had left.

Owner – Did you change jobs again?

Customer – I'd finally found a secure position. I could already picture my retirement several decades later.

Two women, one young and one old, sit at separate tables. The younger woman pretends to work, tapping figures into a calculator and writing them down. The older woman has nothing to do.

Young *(with forced friendliness)* – So this is it? Your last day.

Elderly – Yes.

Young – How does it feel?

Elderly – Like an old film you've watched too many times. By the end, you can't make sense of it any more.

Young – We'll miss you... Are you having a leaving party?

Elderly – A party?

Young – To say goodbye!

Elderly – Oh... I don't know. Should I? *(The younger woman says nothing and continues working.)* Do you know what I'll miss most? The bitter taste of coffee first thing in the morning. A whole day still ahead of you... By lunchtime it's already gone wrong.

Young – What will you do... afterwards?

Elderly – Rest, I suppose... That’s what you’re meant to do, isn’t it?

Young – And will you stay around here, or...?

Elderly – Where would I go?

The younger woman looks puzzled. Her phone rings.

Young – Yes... No... Yes, yes... No, no...

The younger woman hangs up and scribbles something on a sheet of paper.

Elderly – Will she be here soon?

Young – Who?

Elderly – My replacement!

Young – Oh... Monday, I think.

Elderly – Then I won't meet her. Do you know her?

Young – No... *(Embarrassed.)* Actually, I'm your replacement.

Elderly *(without resentment)* – Oh, I see... Congratulations! And the new girl will replace you. That makes sense.

Her phone rings again. The younger woman answers.

Young – Yes... No... Yes, yes... No, no...

Elderly – Would you like a coffee?

Young – Why not?

The older woman brings her a cup.

Elderly – I'll leave you my coffee maker, if you like... In the office, I mean.

Young – How long have you worked here?

Elderly – Too long... *(A pause.)* And you?

Young – I've only just started.

Elderly – Planning to stay?

Young *(pleased)* – My probation ends today. Tomorrow I get a permanent contract. It's automatic.

Elderly – Well, then... You must be happy.

Young – Can't complain.

They sip their coffee.

Elderly – It's good, isn't it? Not too strong?

Young – Perfect.

Elderly – We hardly know each other. Are you married?

Young – Not yet. You?

Elderly – No.

Young – Well, I'd better get back to work.

Elderly – Of course, sorry. It's my last day, so there's not much they can do to me. But your probation doesn't end until tonight. Once you're permanent, you'll have all the time in the world to do nothing.

The younger woman looks at her, unsure whether she's joking, then resumes work. The older woman whistles or hums. Disturbed by the noise, the younger woman gives her a disapproving glance.

Elderly – Sorry... *(The younger woman returns to her work.)* You can have my desk when I'm gone, if you like. It's a bit bigger, isn't it?

Young – Yes. That's the plan.

Elderly – Of course. Silly me. And the new girl will have the small desk. *(Her idleness is clearly distracting the younger woman.)* Sorry, I'll try to find something to do. I ought to start packing anyway... *(She rummages in a large bag.)* Packing! As if I had much to pack. I think it'll all fit in a plastic bag. Strange, isn't it? A whole life, and what do you have to show for it? A few empty folders in a cupboard. You can't say you've left much behind. You wouldn't happen to have a spare plastic bag? *(The younger woman gives her a look that says no.)* And to think I was sitting at your desk when I first came here. Do you know what my dream was back then? *(The younger woman indicates that she doesn't.)* To write. Not to fill pages with reports, as I've done all my life. To write... precisely so I wouldn't have to report to anybody. I thought a quiet little job would leave me time. And the years went by, and I never started.

Young – Well, you'll have time now.

Elderly – Yes. Eternity. But what would I write about? My life? As I said, it would fit in a plastic bag.

The phone rings.

Young – Yes... No...

Elderly – Possibly even in a condom.

Young – Yes, yes... No, no... *(She hangs up.)* Sorry, what were you saying?

Elderly – Nothing.

Young – Do you know what I've been thinking?

Elderly *(hopefully)* – No...

Young – I could ask them to lay some carpet in here.

Elderly *(taken aback)* – Carpet?

Young – So we don't disturb the people below us. Wooden floors are nice, but they creak.

Elderly – Have the people downstairs complained?

Young – No, but there's a lot of coming and going in here.

Elderly – I'm going to be living downstairs.

Young – Oh, really?

Elderly – You have to live somewhere. It's rather dark, but I know the neighbourhood. At least I won't feel lost.

Young – And hearing us walking around over your head all day... Are you sure that won't bother you?

Elderly – It'll give me something to listen to. I'll think, they're working up there, and I can stay in bed all day.

Young – All right. No carpet, then.

The younger woman goes back to work.

Elderly – What about your dreams?

Young – My dreams?

Elderly – You're young. You must still have some. If you won the jackpot, what would you do?

Young – Take a holiday, I suppose.

Elderly – And then?

Young – Then? Perhaps I'd set up my own business.

Elderly – Why?

Young – So I wouldn't have a boss!

Elderly – Set up a business just so you won't have a boss? Surely it would be easier not to work at all.

Young – Maybe... *(Her phone rings.)* No... Yes, yes... No, no... *(She hangs up.)* Now, where was I?

Elderly – Leave. While you still can.

Young – I beg your pardon?

Elderly – Leave! Before it’s too late!

Young – And go where?

Elderly – How old are you? Twenty? Do you really want to end up like me?

Young – I have to earn a living. What do you suggest?

Elderly *(caught off guard)* – Nothing. You're right.

The younger woman resumes work.

Young – You know what I think?

Elderly – No.

Young – They're going to close the company.

Elderly – Close the company? What do you mean?

Young – Do you know what we make here?

Elderly – No.

Young – You've worked here all your life and you don't know what we make?

Elderly – I think I knew when I started. But it's changed so many times. We've been bought out at least ten times. I didn't even realise we still made anything. What is it?

Young – Funeral urns.

Elderly – For people's ashes?

Young – Yes. And sales are collapsing.

Elderly – But people still die, don't they?

Young – Of course. Just not quickly enough to keep us in business.

Elderly – Oh...

Young – The generation we relied on is nearly gone.

Elderly – Is it really that bad?

Young – They'll close this company and open another.

Elderly – Move production overseas?

Young – Not even that. We'll probably keep the same premises.

Elderly – What about the employees?

Young – Apart from natural departures, like yours, they'll probably find everyone another position. They may even take on more people. They'll change the company's name and start making something else. With birth rates rising, there are plenty of possibilities.

Elderly – So what will change?

Young – Not much, really.

The younger woman goes back to work. The older woman is lost in thought.

Elderly – Isn't there any way to stop all this?

Young – Stop what?

Elderly – I don't know... I'm sure if we went on strike, the people upstairs wouldn't even notice.

Young – You're quite an eccentric.

Elderly – Yes. An old eccentric. Have you noticed nobody ever calls someone a young eccentric? When you're young, being eccentric is normal. People put up with it. They encourage it, even. But as you get older, you're meant to grow out of it. Bright-red hair, rings through your nose... After thirty it's embarrassing. After fifty it's almost suspicious. Do you know what getting old is? It's running out of ways to reinvent your life each morning, after your first coffee. In the end, we die from a lack of imagination. You don't strike me as someone who'd wear a nose ring.

Young – Do you have children?

Elderly – No.

Young – Would you have liked some?

Elderly – Whatever for?

Young – So you wouldn't grow old alone, for instance.

Elderly – I have neighbours. They're growing old with me.

Young – Talking to you is quite depressing.

Elderly *(amused)* – Is it?

Young – It's not all that terrible.

Elderly – My being depressing?

Young – Perhaps you expect too much.

Elderly – Yes. That's what the people upstairs said the last time I dared ask for a pay rise.

Young – How long ago was that?

Elderly – I can't remember.

Young – There's nobody upstairs any more. Didn't you know that either?

Elderly – What do you mean, nobody?

Young – We've been bought by a pension fund.

Elderly – You mean... by retired people?

Young – Their widows, at any rate.

Elderly – So once I've retired, I'll actually own the company I worked for?

Young – Exactly. See? You don't even need to win the lottery. You just have to wait.

The older woman falls silent, crushed.

Elderly – If I do have a leaving party, will you come?

Young – Why not? Send me an invitation.

A siren wails in the distance.

Elderly – That's the time. I must go. *(She begins to leave.)* For years, whenever I heard the siren at noon, I had an urge to run for the nearest shelter. I wasn't even alive during the war. But the bombs never came, so I went to lunch instead. *(She turns back to the younger woman.)* I'll leave you my meal vouchers.

She leaves. The younger woman follows a little later. Back to the counter.

Customer – No, I really couldn't see myself ending up like that. So I resigned.

Owner – Again? You don't stay anywhere very long, do you?

Customer – I didn't know exactly what I wanted to do with my life. But I knew what I didn't want to do any more.

Owner – That's how I felt when I stopped working the streets. I couldn't compete on price any more.

Customer – Compete?

Owner – The competition was younger and cheaper. I couldn't keep up. So I thought I might do better behind a bar instead.

Customer – That's when I decided to become a writer.

Owner – Is that a job?

Customer – I sometimes wonder whether telling stories isn't the oldest profession in the world.

The light falls on a table where a woman is sitting, with no drink in front of her. Another woman arrives.

One *(standing up)* – So you came.

Two – Did I have a choice?

They hesitate awkwardly over whether to kiss, then decide not to. They sit down.

One – Would you like something?

Two – I ordered a coffee when I came in.

One – We all know we're not here for ever. But it still comes as a shock.

Two – At his age, he was living on borrowed time, wasn't he?

One – Apparently it happened in his sleep.

Two – Really?

One – At least he didn't suffer. He never even saw it coming.

Two – A good death, as they say. It doesn't make up for a good life, but it's better than nothing.

One – He always did what he wanted.

Two – Is that enough to make a good life?

One – Things were different then.

Two – Yes.

An awkward silence. The second woman gets up.

Two – I'll see what's happened to my coffee. They seem to have forgotten it. Would you like anything else?

One – They haven't brought my order either.

The second woman walks towards the counter, now in darkness. The first touches up her makeup. The other returns with two cups of coffee and sits down.

Two – They'd made them, but forgotten to bring them over.

One – I hope they're still hot.

Two *(taking a sip)* – Well, it's strong. Strong enough to wake the dead.

The other looks at her, uncertain whether she's joking.

One – We never even got to say goodbye.

Two – Goodbye?

One – Farewell, if you prefer.

Two – I'm not sure which I prefer, but...

One – Still, if we'd known...

Two – Even if we'd known the exact date and time, what would it have changed between us?

One – We could have said one last thing to him.

Two – One last thing? Such as?

One – I don't know.

Two – In my case, I'm not sure my last words would have brought him much comfort.

One – There's no point going over the past, now he's gone.

Two – You're right. Let's look resolutely to the future. What shall we do with the body?

One – You make it sound as though we'd murdered him.

Two – I was thinking of cremation.

One – Do you think that's what he'd have wanted?

Two – I have no idea. I don't recall ever talking about anything like that with him. Come to think of it, I don't recall ever having a proper conversation with him. Do you?

One – No. Neither do I.

Two – Then it’s up to us. I’ve never liked the idea of a grand tomb. Unless you’re a great historical figure, of course. We’re hardly going to have him embalmed like Stalin. And I don’t intend to visit a cemetery every year with flowers.

One – I don't know.

Two – That's just me. I wouldn't want to deprive you of the pleasure of putting flowers on his grave once a year. If you think we should invest in a headstone, we'll do whatever you want.

A pause.

One – What would we do with the ashes?

Two – Divide them. It’s all he left us.

One – We can't do that.

Two – If you'd rather scatter the lot over your lawn between the barbecue and the swimming pool, you're welcome to my share.

Silence.

One – How can you be so cruel?

Emotion finally takes over.

Two – How did we end up like this? That's the real question.

One – That's how things are. Nobody's to blame.

Two – Somebody must be to blame!

One – It's too late now.

Silence.

One – And how are you?

Two – Fine.

One – Is that all?

Two – It would take too long.

Her phone rings. She answers.

Two – Hello? Oh, it's you... No, no... Yes, but listen, I'm in a meeting. Well, more of a family meeting. No, not exactly a family celebration either. I'll tell you later. Can I call you back? Okay. Speak soon. Me too.

She puts away her phone.

Two – Sorry. How are you?

One – It's been so long I hardly know where to start.

The other woman's phone rings again.

Two – Sorry... *(She answers.)* Yes? Oh, I see. No, that's all right. No? But I told you to... Okay. I'll be there in an hour.

She puts the phone away.

Two – I'm terribly sorry. What were we saying?

One – Nothing important.

Two – Listen, if you can take care of the arrangements... I really can't face it. Do whatever you think is best. I'm fine with that. And of course we'll split the costs.

She stands up.

Two – I really must go. I hadn't planned on... But we could have lunch together sometime.

One – Why not?

She starts taking a banknote out of her bag.

Two – Leave it. I'll pay on my way out. You've got my number. Let me know what happens.

One – All right.

This time they kiss, awkwardly. The second woman leaves. The first sits back down and finishes her coffee.

One – There. Now it's cold.

Back at the counter.

Customer – I buried my father this afternoon.

Owner *(alarmed)* – Buried?

Customer – Well, I didn't dig a hole after hitting him on the head with a shovel. It was an official ceremony. Perfectly respectable. I mean, it was his funeral.

Owner – Oh, hell.

Customer – I didn't have to organise a thing. He'd bought a funeral plan. They make it so easy now. The death announcement arrived in my email and I chose a wreath through a link to the florist's website.

Owner – That must have hit you hard.

Customer – I don't know... Mostly I felt relieved. He was ninety-eight. I'd begun to think he'd never die. Or that I'd die before he did. It doesn't seem right to die before your parents, does it? In any case, I didn't cry.

Owner – Not crying doesn't mean you're not grieving. *(Solemnly)* The deepest sorrows are silent.

Customer – The only time I ever saw my father cry was when his dog died.

Owner – Animals never let you down.

Customer – That's probably why he left half his estate to an animal charity. I think if he could have taken his dog and all his money into the grave with him, like Tutankhamun, he would have. Just to make sure he lacked nothing in the afterlife. Not even company.

Owner – You're going to make me miserable with all these stories. Another beer? This one's on me.

The owner refills both glasses.

Owner – I don't know... Did you ever try talking to your parents?

Customer – Once I wrote my mother a letter telling her that she couldn't hurt me any more. But that, unfortunately, she couldn't help me any more either.

Owner – Well... That's a start. Did she reply?

Customer – I never sent it. There comes a time in life when you have to give up on that final confrontation with your parents. Accept that you'll never part as friends. That you'll leave things unresolved. And even that isn't always easy.

Owner – I wouldn't know. I never knew my parents.

Customer – You don't know how lucky you are. Family life is a farce played as tragedy. The roles are assigned in advance, and every gathering is a revival of the

same play. Nobody dares change a line for fear of throwing the others off. Or being scolded by the director.

Owner – The director?

Customer – Anyway, I can do as I please now. No partner. No parents. No boss. At last I can write my own life.

Owner – I don't want to hurt your feelings, but... do you really think anyone will be interested? If you were a pop star, a television personality or married to a famous footballer, perhaps...

Customer – I don't mean writing my memoirs. I've never understood people who spend half their lives reading their ancestors' memoirs and the other half writing their own, and forget to live in between.

Owner – Mourning the good old days they wouldn't go back to for anything.

Customer – Moving from birthday to anniversary to commemoration, then spending their holidays on pilgrimages.

Owner – Spending every Sunday putting flowers on the graves of people they couldn't stand when they were alive.

Customer – No. I want to turn my life into a novel.

Owner – Well, that's ambitious.

Customer – Even if it’s only a cheap paperback.

She finishes her beer and prepares to leave.

Customer – I must have been about ten. One evening my nose started bleeding and wouldn’t stop. I kept looking at the cloth, soaked red with blood... My father was watching television.

Owner – And?

Customer – Eventually my mother told him he'd better take me to hospital. But I've always wondered what could have been so fascinating on television that night that he didn't notice his daughter was bleeding to death.

The customer turns to go.

Owner – I could tell a few stories myself, you know. With all the customers I've seen come and go.

Customer – The ones who came to buy tobacco or pipes?

Owner – You'll laugh, but sometimes they're the very same people. I've never left the neighbourhood. My regulars come back for a chat, to tell me all about their miserable lives. A bit like you.

Customer – As I was saying, a bar owner or a prostitute is rather like a priest or a therapist. People come to pour out their troubles, and leave a little money on the counter as they go.

She puts a banknote on the counter. The light picks out one of the tables, where a young woman is sitting. She may be one of the students from the exam-results scene near the beginning. The customer walks towards her.

Customer – Hello.

Girl – Hi.

Customer – I'm the writer. I'm taking a short break. *(She takes out a packet of cigarettes and offers one to the girl.)* Want one? Smoking kills, but it does help the pension system.

Girl – No thanks. I don't smoke.

Customer – Oh. Sorry.

She puts the packet away.

Customer – Are you watching the pigeons?

The girl gives her a doubtful look.

Girl – Is this going to be in the play?

Customer – What?

Girl – What we're saying right now.

Customer – I don't know yet. It depends.

Girl – On what?

Customer – On whether our conversation turns out to be interesting. Have you got anything interesting to say?

Girl – You're the writer.

Customer – Yes.

Girl – Or so you say.

Customer – Yes...

Silence.

Girl – Do you write at night?

Customer – No. Why?

Girl – You look tired.

Customer – I go to bed early, get up late, and do most of my writing just before lunch. Sometimes I do a little more after my afternoon nap.

Girl – Not very rock and roll.

Customer – Well, it's been nice talking to you.

Girl – Are you really a writer?

Customer – Why wouldn't I be?

Girl – Your story seems to be going round in circles.

Customer – You're not making this easy. They say that once you've created a good character, you only have to let them speak.

Girl – That's a convenient excuse. And a play about writing a play? Hasn't that been done rather a lot? When writers start talking about being writers, it's usually because they've run out of things to say.

Customer – Right...

As she is about to leave, she feels the owner's gaze and turns towards her one last time.

Owner *(with gentle irony)* – Still needs a bit of work.

Customer – If you had a child, I'm sure they'd be proud of you.

Music and a change of lighting.

The girl gets up. She and the customer perform a very simple walking dance, crossing and recrossing each other's paths, drawing close and moving apart.

Girl –

Here I am, where no one expected me.
Did I do what I once hoped you would do?
I walk away from someone already waiting for me.

Customer –

I follow my path through moments of quiet happiness
without looking back.
Autumn has swept the leaves from my road,
and the winter wind is already erasing my footprints
from the dust of summer.
Who will be able to say, come spring: I passed this way?

Girl –

There were no words, not even for that memory.
None to name it, none to deny it.
No words to speak of it; who could contradict me?
There were no words. I cannot remember.

Customer –

Just once, holding my breath,
like a stopped clock that tells the right time for an instant,
I would face my fate, even if it cost me everything,
and at the last moment turn back,
take her hand and walk towards the child I used to be.

The customer reaches towards the girl's outstretched hand. Their hands touch, as if passing something from one to the other. The customer exits.

Blackout.

The End

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2

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

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

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

Comedies for 5 to 6

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

Comedies for 7 or more

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

Collection of sketches

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

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded free of charge from his websites:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

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Avignon – May 2024
© La Comédiathèque – ISBN 978-2-38602-214-2
Play available for free download