

La Comédiathèque

At the Bar Counter

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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At the counter, at the time for taking stock, a woman claiming to be an author shares significant moments of her life with the bar owner. These fanciful tales come to life on stage in the bar's room.

*18 characters follow, all female in this version,
but the cast can vary greatly in number and gender.*

Two women enter the café with some hesitation. They glance around the room and approach the bar, behind which the owner stands, stoic, wiping wine glasses.

One – What will you have?

Two – I'm not sure...

One – Red? White?

Two – White...

One – Two glasses of white wine, please.

Owner – I'm out of white.

One – Well... Red, then...

Owner – Two glasses of red wine.

The owner serves them the two glasses.

One – Maybe we should sit while there are still tables available...

Two – Okay.

The two women sit at a table with their glasses. The first takes a sip and grimaces.

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

Two – For the show?

One – Not for the wine, anyway...

The second woman sips her glass.

Two – Ah, yes... This isn't Château Margaux...

One – What exactly is this event?

Two – I didn't quite understand... *(She takes out a brochure from her pocket)* "Little Glasses and Great Wine"... It was free. Must be a cabaret night...

One – Cabaret? There isn't even a stage...

Two – It must be a one-man show, I guess.

One – Or a two-women show, maybe.

Two – You're right. For the moment, we're the only ones in the room.

One – "Little glasses and good wine"... Let's see... *(She checks the brochure.)* Wait, it's not glasses, it's verses! Can't you read, or what?

Two – Verses?

One – Small verses! It's a poetry night!

Two *(takes the brochure and looks again)* – Shit, you're right!

One – How tragic misunderstandings can arise from dyslexia...

Two – No wonder it was free...

One – Poetry... Damn, it's a trap.

Transition music. A customer arrives. Before entering, she takes a final drag of her cigarette.

Two – I think it's time to make ourselves scarce...

As the two women discreetly escape, the customer stands in front of the bar.

Owner – What can I get for you?

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

Owner – Well...

Customer – I just feel like throwing myself under a train.

Owner – Yes... But you're not in the right place for that here. You see, I don't have a station master's cap. So if you want to stay, you'll have to order something.

Customer – Fine, what do you recommend?

Owner – If you fancy it, I have house sangria.

Customer – I'm not sure... What else do you have?

Owner – A while ago, you didn't know what to have, and now you find there's not enough choice?

Customer – One sangria, perfect... When you have suicidal thoughts, sangria seems quite appropriate, doesn't it?

Owner – People don't come here to drink, you know? If they're thirsty or want to get drunk, they have everything they need at home.

Customer (*with irony*) – You're right. Surely they come here for a bit of human warmth...

The owner serves her sangria.

Customer – Another one, please.

Owner – Waiting for someone?

Customer – If I were waiting for my other half, I'd sit at one of those tables and fix myself up. I wouldn't be here, standing, dishevelled, talking to myself.

Owner – Talking to yourself... Thank you.

The customer pushes the second glass towards the owner.

Customer – It's not the same for you... (*They toast.*) A bistro owner is a bit like a psychoanalyst, a priest, or a prostitute. You can tell them everything, but don't expect a response in return.

Owner – Did you come here looking for trouble?

Customer – I came to find inspiration.

Owner – Ah, really...?

Customer – Poets often go to bars to find inspiration. Didn't you know?

Owner (*ironically*) – Yes, of course. All my customers are poets.

Customer – It's said that every day, in our country, two bars close their doors. It was in this morning's newspaper.

Owner – I don't read newspapers.

Customer – Yet, you sell them!

Owner – I also sell cigarettes. And I don't smoke.

Customer – Where will poets go for inspiration when all the bars have been replaced by McDonald's?

Owner – Let them go to hell.

Customer – Believe me, when fast food is on every corner, poets will only write airport literature.

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

Customer – Or maybe because I'm afraid of not finding inspiration.

Owner – And do you really think you'll find something to tell here?

Customer – If bar counters could talk, they'd have plenty to tell, wouldn't they?

Owner – Sure... But I'm not sure who would be interested.

Customer – You know, it was in a café like this one where I found out about my high school exams results.

Owner – Really?

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

Owner – I don't know... I don't even have a driver's license. I think the only permit I'll have in my life will be a burial permit...

Customer – I can always tell my life story... Or yours...?

Owner – Can you make money telling your life story? All my customers do that for free...

Customer – Money? Not much...

Owner – Peanuts?

Customer – Yes, more or less.

Owner – No, I mean... Do you want peanuts?

The light shifts to one of the two tables, where two young girls have sat down. The girls look through the imaginary window situated on the audience's side.

One – What are all those pigeons doing here...?

Two – What?

One – The pigeons! Why are they only in the city? (*The other looks preoccupied with something else.*) They're not really domestic animals. I mean, like dogs or cats. They're birds. They're free, they're not in cages, and they can fly. They could leave.

Two – Where would they go?

One – I don't know. To the countryside. Why don't all these pigeons go to the countryside?

Two – To the countryside...? They wouldn't have anything to peck at...

One – It makes me sick to watch them.

Two (*distracted*) – Yeah...

One – Look, they're coprophilic.

Two – Huh?

One – Haven't you seen what they eat...?

Two – What?

One – Dog excrement...

Two (*looking with little interest*) – Oh, yeah...

One – This must be what they call an ecosystem.

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

One – Cherry season isn't all year round. (*Her phone rings, she answers*) Yes... Yes... Yes... Okay.

She hangs up.

Two – So?

One – It's not published yet...

Two – What if we failed?

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

Two – I don't know. Fear of success. Like a showjumping horse that refuses the obstacle at the last moment. It happens to the greatest champions.

One – Wait, we're not horses. And besides, high school exams aren't a competition. It's like a driver's license. Just because many people have it doesn't mean you have fewer chances of getting it.

Two – Yeah well, precisely. I've already failed the driving test twice...

One – If I fail, I'm dead. My parents would kill me. They put me in that nun's boarding school because they had a 100% success rate. It costs them a minimum wage per month. If I don't pay them back...

Two – However, there have been years when it was 99%. That means someone occasionally fails. It's rare, but it can happen.

One – I don't know... I don't know... Maybe the guy missed his train...

The phone rings. The first answers immediately.

One – Yes... Yes... Yes... Okay...

She hangs up with an unflappable expression.

Two – Well?

One – They've just released the results.

Two (*tense*) – And then?

No longer pretending, the second bursts into joy.

One – And then, we did it! Damn it, we did it, I tell you.

They both hug.

Two – My heart is racing a hundred miles an hour.

One – You mean per minute. At a hundred beats per hour, you'd already be dead.

Two – What grade did we get?

One – Wait, it's already good news... Don't ask for a miracle. Oh, damn it... We'll have to celebrate...

Two – Yes... Although, everyone has their high school diploma now...

One – Mmm... It's the beginning of problems.

Two – Come on... For now... Life is beautiful! It's summer!

They leave. Back to the counter.

Owner – So you graduated

Customer – Yes... With a pass grade.

Owner – Your parents must have been pleased.

Customer – In any case, they didn't say anything to me.

Owner – Some people are silent.

Customer – I would have wanted at least once in my life for my father to tell me he was proud of me. Even if it wasn't true. And you, don't you?

Owner – What I would have wanted is to be able to tell my parents that I was proud of them...

Customer – Do you have children?

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

Customer – Why?

Owner – So, your parents didn't kill you...

Customer – No. But that's when the troubles started.

Owner – Did you struggle to find a job after finishing your studies?

Customer – I ended up finding one. A little job, as they say.

Owner – It's always better than hitting the streets.

Customer – Although... High school is the end of innocence, but the first job is like a deflowering. You realise you're really screwed. You know that only the first time hurts a little and that you'll get used to it. But you suspect you'll need a lot of imagination to enjoy it a bit... How was it for you?

Owner – My deflowering?

Customer – Your first job! What did you do before starting your own business?

Owner – I worked the street.

Customer – Ah... So you know what I'm talking about...

The light shifts to the second table, where a sales executive-type woman is sitting. A young blonde woman with a student-style demeanour arrives.

Woman – Please, take a seat... (*A little surprised*) So, you're Miss...?

Young – Ben Salah. Fatima Ben Salah...

Woman – That's right... And... you're blonde...

Young – Yes, I know, I'm often told... Actually, it's my great-grandfather who... But normally, it reassures my employers. When I manage to get to the job interview, of course... Is there a problem?

Woman – Not at all...

Young – The job offer said you were looking for a salesperson...?

Woman – Insurance contracts, yes. We sell funeral insurance policies. An already very saturated market. We're looking for someone to prospect in the suburbs...

Young – Why not a blonde?

Woman – For door-to-door in the neighbourhoods... We thought that a blonde... Well, would cause less empathy...

Young (*handing her a sheet*) – I have a record, you know? I mean, a resume...

Woman – You have to be very skilled to sell these kinds of products. When you don't know how you're going to pay the rent at the end of the month, obviously, you don't think every morning as you drink your coffee about taking out a 50-year loan to finance your final resting place...

Young – That's for sure...

Woman – Initially, we were in publishing. That wasn't easy either. Selling a 28-volume encyclopaedia to people who mostly can't read. At least not in English...

Young – There are still illustrations in encyclopaedias...

Woman – Then we dabbled in health insurance a bit. But with the competition... No, funeral plans, today, are still the most profitable... It's the future...

Young – You're not sure to get sick, but you're sure to die one day... Everyone... Even illiterates...

Woman – This isn't a testing operation, is it?

Young – Pardon...?

Woman – You didn't dye your hair blonde just to later accuse us of discrimination?

Young – Rest assured, I'm a true blonde..., I'm a natural blonde...

Woman – We're not racists, you know? It's just that in this case... We were planning to entrust you with the development of a new market – what we call in our jargon, halal funeral insurance. A sector in strong expansion. The logical consequence of the large immigration flow from the 1950s.

Young – I can speak with an Arabic accent.

Woman – You could do that...?

Young – With a little refresher course...

Woman – Do you think it would work?

Young – If I wear a burqa...

The woman reflects.

Woman – Well... You've convinced me. When you apply for a sales position, you have to start by knowing how to sell yourself. And believe me, selling me a blonde wasn't easy. (*Getting up*) Bravo! I'll take you on a trial basis.

Young – Thank you.

Woman – And if you perform well, in three months, you'll move on to having a perpetual concession...

Young – Do you mean a permanent contract?

Woman (*rising with a satisfied smile*) – It's nice to see young people still eager to work.

They leave. Back to the counter.

Owner – You didn't come here to sell me a perpetual concession, did you? If so, let me know immediately. I've decided to be cremated and leave my ashes to science...

Customer – No, don't worry. Besides, I've never managed to sell a single funeral plan. To achieve that, you have to be more than just skilled, believe me. You have to have faith...

Owner – You don't believe in God?

Customer – And God, does he believe in us?

Owner – And then? Did you join a convent?

Customer – Then, I found a real job.

Owner – A blonde's job.

Customer – Exactly.

Owner – But that didn't work out either.

Customer – I don't think I was cut out for the business world.

Owner – It's immediately obvious that you're not a fighter, that's for sure.

Customer – I thought I would get used to it. Come to terms with it.

Owner – Well, I understand. I could never have a boss.

Customer – And no, I could never resign myself. Perpetual concessions really aren't my thing...

Owner – Being commanded by no one, not having anyone to command... As soon as you have employees, you're their slave.

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

The light returns to one of the two tables. A woman, executive-type in smart attire but with jeans, sits at the table. She opens her briefcase and takes out a catalog which she flips through as she sips her coffee. Her phone rings and she answers.

Executive – Yes... Oh, really...? Yes, yes, I'll wait for them. No, no, I think I'm a bit early. What time exactly do we have the appointment?

A woman arrives, her manager, in a suit, typical executive woman, with the phone glued to her ear. She seems very hurried, as if she had taken cocaine. She sits at the same table.

Director – At ten forty-five. Do you have the images for the new campaign?

They continue talking through their phones as if they weren't sitting opposite each other.

Executive – Yes, yes, of course. You'll see, it's magnificent...

The woman turns a new page of the catalog. Her manager takes the catalog from her hands and examines it in turn.

Director – Ah, yes, it's...

Executive – It's different..

Director – Yes...

Executive – The creatives really did a good job.

Director – For once, they showed some creativity.

The executive woman first realises the ridiculousness of the situation, seeming to finally see her manager in front of her.

Executive – Would you like a coffee?

Lifting her eyes from the catalog, the director also sees her interlocutor.

Director – Uh, no, thank you. I've quit coffee. It stains my teeth and makes me want to pee.

The director examines the other woman, as if something in her attire surprises her, unable to decipher immediately what.

Manager – You're not wearing a bra...?

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

Manager – No, no... Well... Don't you usually wear one?

Executive – Since it's Friday, I thought that... It would be more casual...

Manager – More casual?

Executive – You know... Friday wear, right...?

Manager – Friday wear...?

Executive – In the States, on Fridays, all executives dress like this. A bit less formal. Neat, but casual...

Manager – In the States...?

Executive – Without a bra.

Director (*uncomfortable*) – Right...

A somewhat awkward silence.

Executive – Can I speak candidly?

Director (*a little concerned*) – Speak candidly? I wonder if I didn't prefer it when you wore a bra, after all.

Executive – Our company has a somewhat outdated image among its clients, you know. All the studies show it. A bit out of touch, understand? Besides the new catalog, I thought that by adopting "Friday wear"... we'd be more... in tune.

The director seems completely surprised. She hesitates for a moment before deciding.

Director – Oh, and after all, you're right...

She turns away from the audience, contorts for a moment, then faces forward again holding her bra.

Director – If it's good enough for the Yankees...

The other seems a bit surprised.

Director (*relieved*) – Ah... It's true that it feels better... Do I look cooler like this?

Executive – Much cooler.

Director – Next time, I'll take off my panties too...

But the director still seems a bit worried.

Director – But... isn't it a bit...? In relation to our client, I mean...

Executive – No, why...?

Director – Well, after all... Lingerie... That's what they sell, right?

Executive – Ah...! Oh, no! Why? And besides, it's only on Fridays.

The director seems to resign herself.

Director (*relaxing a bit*) – Well, I still have to take you to the client... (*Pleased with her joke*) Like the farmer takes the cow to the bull...

The executive seems a bit puzzled. Both stand up to go to their appointment.

Director – Who are we meeting with?

Executive – With the new CEO.

Director – The new one?

Executive – The previous one committed suicide last Friday. Weren't you aware?

Director – Oh my God, no... What a strange idea.

Executive – She hanged herself from the balcony of her office. With the strap of her bra, precisely...

Director – Anyway, it's resilient... To bear such weight...

The executive seems a bit surprised and unsettled to see her manager so relaxed.

Director – I'm joking. We said we were cool, didn't we?

They exit. Back to the bar.

Client – Of course, we lost the client...

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

Client – No. I quit. I left to travel the world, and when I came back, I bought a lottery ticket.

Owner – I would have bought the ticket first.

Client – I decided to spend my winnings in advance... Just in case I didn't win the jackpot. Have you ever been around the world?

Owner – No... And as for the Jackpot... It's like with cigarettes. I sell lottery tickets. But I don't play.

Client – You're a seller of dreams, in a way.

Owner – And believe me, the poorer people are, the more they need to dream.

Customer – When I was little, next to my house, there was a joke shop. It was called "Children's Happiness". I passed by it every day on my way to school, I looked at the window, but I couldn't afford to go in. Very early on, I learned that if happiness is just a joke, you still need to have the means to afford it...

The light returns to one of the two tables. Two women are sitting. The first one looks straight ahead.

Woman 1 – What are you looking at?

Woman 2 – I'm waiting for the lottery results. They'll show them on the screen, there...

Woman 1 – Do you play the lottery?

Woman 2 – I felt like giving it a try.

Woman 1 – Why not...? (*Silence*) What's the jackpot?

Woman 2 – 115 million.

Woman 1 – 115 million...

Woman 2 – You're wondering what you could do with 115 million.

Woman 1 – Beyond a certain amount, we don't have a reference anyway. When they tell you a star is 115 million light-years away, you don't wonder how much that is in kilometres.

Woman 2 – Or how much it would cost you in gas to get there with your Ford Fiesta...

Woman 1 – What numbers did you play?

Woman 2 – My social security number.

Woman 1 – Fortune favours the bold... Can you imagine if we won...

Woman 2 – It's a bit hard for me to imagine.

Woman 1 – We wouldn't have to get up on Mondays to go to work anymore. 365 days of holiday per year...

Woman 2 – Yes... Leaving everything behind...

Woman 1 – Everything? What would you do if you had 115 million right now? Well, 57 million and a half... (*The second one looks at her.*) Wait, we're not married, are we? For better or for worse...

Woman 2 – I don't know... You win 10,000 euros, you're happy. You treat yourself a little. I mean, it doesn't change your life. But 115 million... There's a before and an after. There you become someone completely different. It's like a second birth. It's a bit scary, isn't it?

Woman 1 – I'd start by telling my boss exactly what I think of him... and then I'd go straight to the Mercedes dealership to buy myself a car bigger than his. Winning the lottery is another way of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat... on an individual level...

Woman 2 – It must be quite a shock, though. Having no limits to your desires, from one day to the next. No constraints anymore. Being able to do whatever you want. Anything you want...

Woman 1 – I think I could handle it.

Woman 2 – Not sure... Just read the papers. The number of lottery winners who end up completely broke...

Woman 1 – If all you risk by winning the lottery is ending up broke... You don't have much to lose...

Woman 2 – Not to mention divorces... Do you think our relationship would withstand it?

Silence.

Woman 1 – Then again, I'm not sure... How do you give meaning to a billionaire's life that just falls into your lap like that, by chance?

Woman 2 – Do you think billionaire's daughters ask themselves these kinds of metaphysical questions?

Woman 1 – Yeah, but they were born into it. They've had time to get used to it. They don't know anything else. When you win the lottery, it just happens all at once. One chance in 20 million, can you believe it...

Woman 2 – The average number of sperm in an ejaculation is 300 million.

Woman 1 – So what?

Woman 2 – So, if we're both here, we're already quite fortunate. Our proletarian lives also fell into our laps by chance. Let's say we're giving the lottery a second chance here. To correct fate, which didn't give us a silver spoon in our mouths.

Woman 1 – I don't know... It scares me a little... And it would also mean that our current life is worthless... That it wasn't worth living... Is that what you think? Is that why you play the lottery?

Woman 2 – But, what are you saying...? And besides, it's the first time I'm playing. It's just for fun.

Woman 1 – Most winners are people who played for the first time. It's known as beginner's luck...

Suddenly, they both seem almost worried.

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

They look, glued, at the draw.

Woman 1 – And then?

Woman 2 (*checking her ticket*) – We don't have any correct numbers. It's very rare, you know. I forgot some of my statistics lessons at school, but I wonder if the probability of not having any numbers is almost as high as having them all.

Woman 1 – So, in a way, we could say we were lucky...

They look at each other with complicity and share a tender moment.

Woman 2 – And to think that all this happiness could have slipped through our fingers in an instant...

Woman 1 – Sends shivers down your spine...

Back to the counter with the owner and the client.

Client – I've never had much luck in life. I've never won anything, not even in a raffle. Not even in the king cake, I can't remember ever getting the lucky charm. I wasn't asking for the jackpot. A consolation prize would have been enough for me...

Owner – But you've never had any major setbacks.

Client – That's true. I can't say I've been particularly unlucky either. A normal life, you know. No great happiness. No big tragedy. Neither a fairy tale nor a calamity. Not much trouble, but nothing very exciting either...

Owner – And yet, you ended things.

Client – She was the one who left me.

Owner – She? (*The other doesn't respond*) Ah, I see...

Client – We've known each other since nursery school. The classes weren't mixed back then. But I'm not sure that explains anything...

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

Client – She was my first love... But childhood loves... Rarely last beyond high school or getting a driver's license...

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

Client – Childhood loves are forever... It's childhood that doesn't last.

The light returns to one of the two tables.

Two women look straight ahead, directly in front of them. The second one wears a hat on her head, from which no hair protrudes.

One – Did you see that tree, how beautiful it is?

Two – Yes.

One – It's so much a part of the landscape... that we end up not seeing it.

Two – Mmm...

One – It's an oak. We weren't even born, and it was already here.

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

One – We hung a swing on one of its branches when we were little. It was already that big. Don't you remember?

Two – No.

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

Two – You've broken so many things. How do you expect me to remember...? Once, you even broke your ass.

One – My coccyx.

Two – Falling off a chair. It's incredible. I wonder which bone you haven't fractured. (*A pause*) The coccyx... I didn't even know it existed at that time. And even now, I'm not sure how to spell it.

One – All I can tell you is that it scores a lot of points in Scrabble...

Two – When I imagine you as a child, I see you with a cast... Even in class photos, you always have an arm in a sling, crutches, or a large bandage. It makes you wonder how you managed to make it here in one piece.

One – You've never broken anything. Like that tree, there...

Two – Nevertheless, I did the same stupid things as you... I've also lived dangerously. I've even shucked oysters at Christmas. And I've never stabbed myself with the knife...

One – You always had more luck than me. I often resented you for that...

Two – Do you really think I've been lucky...?

One – Yeah, go ahead, call me clumsy.

Two – Where are you going with your tree?

One – It's weathered every storm. Not a single broken branch. Like you. In a hundred years, it'll still be here.

Two – Even if it's standing, it might be hollow inside by now. Look, it doesn't even have a leaf on its head. Just like me, actually.

One – It's normal. It's autumn...

Two – Ah, yes, that's true. I didn't realise summer had passed... From my hospital window, I had a view of the hypermarket parking lot.

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

Some time passes.

Two – And my hair, do you think it'll grow back in spring?

One – I'll bet my arm on it...

Back at the counter with the owner and the customer.

Owner – It's hard to see the people we love go. But you know what makes me the most sad?

Customer – No.

Owner – Seeing my neighbours grow old...

Customer – Ah, yes.

Owner – One day, we think they'll die. And others will come in their place. Young people. Young people can be noisy sometimes. You never know who you'll end up with... Anyway, we're still here. For now...

Customer – Yes. But then I thought if I didn't want to die a fool, it was now or never to try to give some meaning to what life I had left.

Owner – Did you change jobs again?

Customer – I had finally found a stable job. And I was already imagining my retirement, a few decades later...

Two women (a young one and an elderly one) are sitting at separate tables. The young one pretends to work by tapping on a calculator and jotting down numbers on a sheet. The elderly one seems idle.

Young (*with a slightly forced kindness*) – So, that's it? It's the last one...

Elderly – Yes...

Young – How does it feel?

Elderly – It's like an old movie we've seen too many times. In the end, we don't understand anything anymore...

Young – We'll miss you... Will you throw a party?

Elderly – A party?

Young – A farewell party!

Elderly – Ah... I don't know... Should I...? (*The young one doesn't answer and continues to work.*) You know what I'll miss the most? The slightly bitter taste of coffee in the morning. The day begins... By noon, it's already over...

Young – What will you do... after?

Elderly – Rest... In peace... That's what people do, I guess...

Young – And are you staying around here, or...?

Elderly – Where else would I go...?

A perplexed look from the young one, interrupted by the ringtone of her mobile phone.

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

The young one hangs up and scribbles something on a piece of paper.

Elderly – Is she coming soon?

Young – Who?

Elderly – My replacement!

Young – Ah... I think on Monday...

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

Young – No... (*A little embarrassed*) Actually, I'm the one replacing you...

Elderly (*without hostility*) – Ah, I see... Congratulations...! And the rookie will replace you... That makes sense...

The phone rings again. The young one answers the call.

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

Elderly – Would you like some coffee?

Young – Why not.

The elderly woman brings her a cup.

Elderly – I'll leave you the coffee maker, if you want...

Young – How long have you been here?

Elderly – Too long... (*Some time*) And you?

Young – I've just arrived...

Elderly – Do you plan to stay?

Young (*content*) – I'm finishing my trial period today... Tomorrow, I'll be on a permanent contract... It's automatic...

Elderly – In that case... Are you happy, then?

Young – It's alright...

They sip their coffee.

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

Young – It's perfect...

Elderly – Actually, we hardly know each other. Are you married?

Young – Not yet... And you?

Elderly – No...

Young – Well... I need to get back to it...

Elderly – Yes, sorry. For me, it's my last day, so I don't have much to lose. But you. If your trial period doesn't end until tonight. You'll have plenty of time to do nothing when you're there for good...

The young woman looks at the other, wondering if she's joking. Then, she returns to work. The elderly woman hums or whistles. The young one, evidently bothered by the noise, covertly casts a disapproving glance at her.

Elderly – Sorry... (*The young one returns to work.*) You can sit at my place when I leave. The table is a bit bigger, isn't it...

Young – Yes... That's planned...

Elderly – True, I'm silly... And the new one will take the small table. (*The elderly woman's idle presence seems to distract the young one.*) Sorry, I'll try to do something. In fact, I should think about packing my things... (*She rummages in a large bag.*) Well, when I say packing... I think everything will fit in a plastic bag... It's incredible... A whole life, and what's left...? Can't say we leave much behind, can we? Don't you happen to have a plastic bag, by any chance? (*The young one gives her a look to indicate she doesn't.*) And to think I used to occupy your desk when I first came here... You know what I used to dream about back then? (*The young one shakes her head.*) Writing... No... Not filling pages of reports, as I've done all my life... Writing... I thought by taking a quiet little job, I'd have time to start... And then, the years passed, and I never got around to it...

Young – Now you'll have time...

Elderly – Yes. Eternity... But, to tell what? My life? I already told you, it would fit in a small plastic bag...

The phone rings.

Young – Yes... No...

Elderly – Maybe even in a condom...

Young – Yes, yes... No, no... (*The young one hangs up.*) You were saying...?

Elderly – Nothing...

Young – You know what I was thinking...?

Elderly (*hopefully*) – No...

Young – What if I used this opportunity to ask for some carpet?

Elderly (*surprised*) – Carpet?

Young – So as not to disturb the people below! Hardwood floors look nice, but... They creak...

Elderly – Have the downstairs complained already?

Young – No... But there's quite a bit of coming and going here...

Elderly – I'm going to live downstairs.

Young – Oh, really...?

Elderly – Gotta live somewhere... It's a bit dark, but... I know the neighbourhood well... I won't feel out of place...

Young – And hearing us walk around like that, above you... all day... Are you sure it won't bother you?

Elderly – It'll serve as a distraction... I'll think... They're working up there while I... can stay in bed all day...

Young – Well... No carpeting then...

The young woman returns to work.

Elderly – What about your dreams?

Young – My dreams?

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

Young – I'd take a vacation, I guess...

Elderly – And then?

Young – Then... Maybe I'd start my own business...

Elderly – For...?

Young – So I wouldn't have a boss!

Elderly – Starting a business to avoid having a boss... Might as well not work at all... It's simpler, isn't it?

Young – Yes, maybe... (*She's interrupted by the phone ringing*) No... Yes, yes... No, no... (*She hangs up*) Now, where was I...

Elderly – Go...

Young – Pardon?

Elderly – Go! While you still can!

Young – Go where?

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

Young – Gotta make a living... What do you suggest...

Elderly (*bewildered*) – Nothing... You're right...

The young woman returns to work.

Young – You know what I think?

Elderly – No...

Young – They're going to close the company.

Elderly – What do you mean... shut down the company?

Young – Do you know what we manufacture...?

Elderly – No...

Young – You've worked here your whole life, and you don't know what we manufacture?

Elderly – At the beginning, I think I knew... But it's changed so much... We've been bought out at least ten times. I didn't even know we still made anything... What do we manufacture?

Young – Coffins!

Elderly – Coffins?

Young – The market is collapsing.

Elderly – Abstention...?

Young – Funeral urns!

Elderly – Ah...

Young – The boom of the elderly has passed...

Elderly – Is it that serious?

Young – They're going to shut down the company... and they'll open another one...

Elderly – Relocation?

Young – Not even. Actually, we'll probably keep the same premises...

Elderly – And the staff?

Young – Apart from natural departures, like yours, we'll probably end up reassigning everyone... We might even rehire... We just need to change the company's name to manufacture something else... We have plenty of options...

Elderly – So, what changes?

Young – Actually, not much.

The young woman returns to work. The elderly woman remains pensive.

Elderly – There really is no way to stop all this...

Young – What?

Elderly – I don't know... In fact, I'm sure that if we went on strike, no one upstairs would notice...

Young – You're quite unique...

Elderly – Yes... A unique old woman... Have you noticed? We never say a young person is unique. It's normal to be unique when you're young... It's tolerated... It's even recommended... Almost hygienic. But as you get older... It's supposed to pass... Red hair... or nose rings. Past thirty, it's old-fashioned. So over fifty, it's downright suspicious... You know what it's like, to grow old? It's not knowing how to reinvent your life every morning, past coffee time... In fact, we die for lack of imagination. You're not very... nose rings, are you...?

Young – Do you have children?

Elderly – No...

Young – Would you have liked to have any?

Elderly – Why?

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

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

Young – It's quite depressing talking to you...

Elderly (*amused*) – Do you think so...?

Young – It's not that serious.

Elderly – That I'm depressing?

Young – Maybe you're expecting too much.

Elderly – Yes... That's what they told me upstairs the last time I dared to ask for a raise...

Young – How long ago was that...?

Elderly – I don't know...

Young – There's no one left up there... You weren't aware of that either?

Elderly – What do you mean, no one left...?

Young – We've been bought out by pension funds.

Elderly – You mean... retirees?

Young – Their widows, at least.

Elderly – So after I leave, I'll be the boss of my own company?

Young – Well, yes... You see, there's not even a need to play the lottery. Just wait...

The elderly woman, devastated, remains silent.

Elderly – If I organise a farewell party, will you come?

Young – Why not? Send me a death notice...

In the distance, the roar of a siren is heard.

Elderly – It's time... I have to go... (*She starts to leave.*) For years, when I heard the siren at noon, I reflexively rushed to the shelters... Yet I never experienced the war... But the bombing never came. So I just went to lunch... (*She turns back to the young woman one last time.*) I'll leave you my meal vouchers...

She leaves. The young woman follows shortly after. Back to the counter with the owner and the customer.

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

Owner – Again? You're the unstable type!

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

Owner – That's a bit like what I thought when I stopped hooking. Anyway, I couldn't make ends meet anymore.

Customer – Making ends meet...?

Owner – Everyone talks about the Polish plumber, but the Czech prostitute did us a lot of harm too... So I had the idea to take over this bar.

Customer – That was when I thought about starting to write...

Owner – Is that a job?

Customer – Telling stories, I wonder if that isn't the oldest job in the world...

Light on a table where a woman is seated. There are no drinks in front of her. Another woman arrives.

One (*getting up*) – Ah, you've come...

Two – Did I have a choice?

Uncomfortable, they hesitate to kiss but refrain. They sit down.

One – Do you want something?

Two – I ordered a coffee.

One – Even though we know we're not here forever... It affects you...

Two – At his age... We knew he was on notice, right?

One – Apparently, it happened while he was asleep.

Two – Ah, I see...?

One – At least he didn't suffer... He didn't even see himself go.

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

One – He always did what he wanted...

Two – Is that enough to have a good life...?

One – It was a different time.

Two – Yes...

Uncomfortable silence. The second one gets up.

Two – I'll see what they're doing with my coffee... Looks like they forgot about me... Are you getting anything else?

One – They still haven't brought me what I ordered either...

Two approaches the bar in the darkness. One touches up her makeup. Two returns with two cups of coffee.

Two – They had them ready, but they forgot to bring them to us...

One – I hope it's still hot...

Two (*taking a sip*) – In any case, it's strong... It would wake the dead...

The other gives her a surprised look, wondering if it's a joke or not.

One – We couldn't even say goodbye to him.

Two – Say goodbye?

One – Bid farewell, if you prefer...

Two – I don't know what I prefer, but alright...

One – Still... If only we had known...

Two – Even if we had known the date and time... Between us, what would it have changed?

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

Two – One last word? Like what, for example?

One – I don't know...

Two – Personally, I'm not sure the last word I could have said to him would have been much of a comfort...

One – There's no point in dwelling on the past now that he's gone...

Two – You're right... Let's look resolutely towards the future... So, what do we do with the body?

One – You talk as if we were the ones who killed him...

Two – I was thinking about cremation...

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

Two – Well... I don't recall ever having that kind of conversation with him... In fact, I don't recall ever having a real conversation with him... And you?

One – No, neither do I...

Two – In that case, it's up to us to decide. Personally, I've never been much of a fan of the mausoleum side. Except for great men, of course. We're not going to embalm him like Stalin... And as I don't intend to go and leave flowers on his grave every year on All Saints' Day.

One – I don't know...

Two – I'm speaking for myself... But I wouldn't want to deprive you of the pleasure of going to flower his grave once a year... If you think it's better to invest in stone... We'll do as you wish.

A moment passes.

One – And what would we do with the ashes?

Two – We split them. Since it's all he left us.

One – We can't do that...

Two – If you'd rather scatter them all in your lawn between the barbecue and the pool, I'm ready to give you my share, don't worry.

Silence.

One – How can you be so harsh...?

Emotion overtakes her.

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

One – Well... It is what it is... It's nobody's fault...

Two – It's somebody's fault, necessarily!

One – It's too late anyway.

Silence.

One – And how about you, how are you?

Two – I'm fine.

One – Is that all?

Two – It would take too long...

Her phone rings, she answers.

Two – Yes... Oh, it's you... No, no... Yes, yes, but... Listen, I'm in a meeting now. Well... more like a family gathering. No, it's not really a family party either, I'll tell you. Can I call you back later? Okay, see you later... You too...

She hangs up her phone.

Two – Sorry... And how about you, how are you?

One – It's been so long... I don't know where to start...

The other's phone rings again.

Two – Sorry... (*She takes the call.*) Yes? Okay. No, no, it's not a problem. Really? But I told you to... Okay, I'll be there in an hour.

She puts away her phone.

Two – I'm really sorry... What were we talking about?

One – It doesn't matter.

Two – Listen, honestly, if you can handle it for... I'm just not up to it... Do what you feel is right, for me, there's no problem... And of course, we'll split the costs...

She stands up.

Two – I really have to go now... I hadn't planned on it... But we can have lunch together one of these days...

One – Why not.

She starts to take out a bill from her purse to pay.

Two – Leave it, I'll pay on my way out. You have my number, keep me posted?

One – Okay...

This time they awkwardly kiss each other. The second one leaves. The first sits back down and finishes her coffee.

Two – And now it's cold...

Back at the counter.

Customer – I buried my father this afternoon...

Owner (*concerned*) – Buried?

Customer – Yes, well... It's not like I dug the hole after smashing his skull with a shovel... It was a perfectly official ceremony... Very proper. I mean, it was his funeral, you know...

Owner – Oh, damn...

Customer – I didn't have to take care of anything. He had taken out a funeral plan. It's very well done these days. I received the announcement directly in my email inbox, and I chose the wreath on the florist's website provided.

Owner – It must have affected you.

Customer – I don't know... I was rather relieved, actually... He was 98 years old... After a while, I started to believe he would never die... Or that I would die before him... Isn't it strange to die before your parents? Anyway, I didn't cry.

Owner – Just because you don't cry doesn't mean you're not grieving. (*Sententious*) The greatest pains are silent...

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

Owner – Animals never disappoint you.

Customer – That's probably why he left half of his estate to the animal shelter. I think if he could have taken his dog and all his money with him to his grave, like Tutankhamun, he would have. Just to make sure he wouldn't miss anything on the other side. Not even company...

Owner – You're going to get me down with your stories... Let me pour you another one? It's on me...

The owner refills both glasses.

Owner – I don't know... Have you ever tried talking to your parents?

Customer – I wrote a letter to my mother once, telling her she couldn't do anything against me anymore. But unfortunately, she couldn't do anything for me either...

Owner – Oh, I see... That's a start... Did she reply?

Customer – I never sent the letter. There comes a point in life where you have to give up on the big explanation with your parents. Accept leaving each other not really as good friends... To remain on a misunderstanding... But even that's not always easy...

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

Customer – You don't know how lucky you are... Family is a boulevard tragedy... The roles are assigned in advance, and at every reunion, the same play is performed... No one dares to change their lines to avoid destabilising their partners. And for fear of being scolded by the director.

Owner – The director...

Customer – Well, now I can do whatever I want... No partner. No parents. No boss. Finally, I'll be able to write my life...

Owner – I don't want to upset you, but... do you really think anyone would be interested? I don't know... If you were a singing star, a weather presenter, or a footballer's wife...

Customer – I'm not talking about writing my memoirs, you know? I never understood all those people who spend half their lives reading their ancestors' memoirs, and the other half writing theirs. Forgetting to live in between.

Owner – Crying over a good old time they wouldn't want to relive for anything in the world.

Customer – Jumping from birthdays to commemorations before going on pilgrimage vacations.

Owner – Spending their Sundays placing flowers on the graves of people they hated when they were alive.

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

Owner – Oh, I see, quite ambitious.

Customer – Even if it's just a pulp novel...

She finishes her beer and prepares to leave.

Customer – I must have been ten. One evening, I started to have a nosebleed. It wouldn't stop. I was staring at the blood-red dishcloth... My father was watching TV.

Owner – And then?

Customer – My mother finally told him it would be better to take me to the hospital. But I always wondered what could have been so fascinating on TV that night for my father not to notice that his daughter was bleeding out.

The owner goes back to cleaning glasses.

Fade to black.

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:

Comedies for 2

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
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Joker
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

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

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
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
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools

Comedies for 7 or more

Backstage Comedy
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
Neighbours'Day
Open Hearts
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Him and Her
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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