

La Comédiathèque



Jean-Pierre
Martinez

Of vegetables and books

A Philosophical Farce

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Of Vegetables and Books

A Philosophical Farce

Jean-Pierre Martinez

The storefront of a grocery shop, which also serves as a bookstore, sets the stage for delightful exchanges between a philosophical grocer and his quirky customers, each in search of answers to their existential questions.

A philosophical farce that blends outrageous situations with reflections on the absurdity of life.

Characters:

Socrates
Mildred
Josie
Billy
Eve
Ethan
Charles
Sanchez
Ramirez

*With the exception of Ethan and Eve, who are respectively male and female,
all characters can be portrayed as either male or female by simply
changing their names, without altering the dialogues.
The roles of Charles and Ramirez can be played by the same actor.*

Possible casting for 9 actors:

1M/8W, 2M/7W, 3M/6W, 4M/5W, 5M/4W, 6M/3W, 7M/2W, 8M/1W

Possible casting for 8 actors:

1M/7W, 2M/6W, 3M/5W, 4M/4W, 5M/3W, 6M/2W, 7M/1W

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The front of a shop, with the entrance door in the centre. On one side, crates of fruit and vegetables are displayed on stands. On the other, boxes of books, reminiscent of a second-hand bookstall. Near the door, a set of weighing scales. For now, the front of the stage, representing a pavement, is empty. Enter Josie, pulling a wheeled shopping trolley. She stops in front of the produce and begins inspecting it. Picking up a banana, she feels it, but dissatisfied with the result, she puts it back. Enter Mildred.

Mildred – Don't hold back, will you!

Josie – What? What's the problem?

Mildred – You're fondling that banana and then putting it back in the crate...

Josie – So what? I like my bananas firm. Is that not allowed?

Mildred – You have to admit, it's not very hygienic for the people coming after you!

Josie – Oh, really? And why not?

Mildred – If your hands are dirty...

Josie – Dirty hands! *(Suddenly changing her tone)* Actually, I've just been reading this book...

Mildred – What book?

Josie – The play! *Dirty Hands*. By Jean-Paul Sartre.

Mildred – Oh, right... And what did you think of it?

Josie – Between you and me, not great...

Mildred – Sartre hasn't aged well.

Josie – Philosophers shouldn't be allowed to write plays.

Mildred – If you ask me, they shouldn't be allowed to write philosophical treatises either...

Josie – Did Socrates write *The Symposium* or *The Republic*?

Mildred – No more than God wrote the Old Testament or Jesus Christ the New.

Josie – Nothing new since Heraclitus...

Mildred – Unfortunately, though, there's been a lot of writing.

Josie – Far too much!

Mildred – Philosophy books are getting thicker and thicker, with less and less inside.

Josie – And more and more obscure! They're fine for lighting a fire, but for wrapping vegetables... The pages are too small...

Mildred – Philosophy has gone downhill since the Greeks.

Josie – A pile of completely hollow books stacked up over millennia in our dusty libraries...

Mildred – Philosophy is a shaky construction.

Josie – If we could climb this house of cards without it collapsing, we'd probably reach the highest regions of the stratosphere.

Mildred – Not to mention the vast emptiness of outer space.

Josie – Philosophy is a scam. I don't remember who said we're dwarves standing on the shoulders of giants...

Mildred – Bernard of Chartres.

Josie – That's the one... But that only applies to scientific disciplines, which involve the idea of progress. Philosophy isn't a science; it's an opinion!

Mildred – Today's philosophers are just dwarves standing on the shoulders of all the dwarves who came before them.

Josie – It reminds me of those human pyramids the Catalans build in the streets during their festivals. The biggest ones are at the bottom, and the smallest ones are on top.

Mildred – Alas, pyramids of dwarves are much less appealing than the pyramids of Egypt.

Josie – And much less stable.

Mildred – Not to mention, not everything the Catalans do is worth copying.

Josie – Climbing on top of each other in the street like that... With the youngest on the oldest...

Mildred – So, are you taking that banana or not?

Josie – I think I'll go with this one. It's firmer.

Mildred – I prefer mine nice and ripe.

Josie – Each to their own...

Mildred also starts inspecting the display.

Mildred – I'll have a pound of carrots, I think...

Josie – For soup or grated carrots?

Mildred – Is it any of your business?

Josie – You're right. Questions are best left for Socrates...

Mildred – Better to ask the Lord than his saints...

Josie (*calling out*) – Socrates!

The greengrocer appears, stepping out of the shop.

Socrates – Ladies... How can I help you?

Mildred (*handing him the carrots*) – Here, Socrates, can you weigh these for me?

Josie – Hey, don't mind me! I was here first, wasn't I?

Mildred – I thought you hadn't made up your mind yet... Want to give those bananas another squeeze?

Josie shrugs and hands her bananas to Socrates.

Josie – Here you go... (*Socrates takes the bananas and places them on the scales.*) I also wanted to ask you something...

Socrates – Go ahead...

Josie – Wait, I wrote it down on my shopping list... (*She takes out a crumpled piece of paper, unfolds it laboriously, and reads.*) Ah, here it is... Why is there something rather than nothing?

Socrates – And all that for the price of a pound of bananas...

Josie – You think it's a silly question?

Socrates – Why is there something rather than nothing...

Josie – Well?

Socrates – Actually, the answer is quite simple.

Mildred – Do you mind if I listen in too?

Josie – Be my guest...

Socrates – When a philosophical question clearly has no possible answer, it's because the question itself is flawed.

Josie – It's obvious...

Socrates – Or perhaps the question has been deliberately framed to make it impossible to answer.

Josie – Uh... Yes.

Socrates – First of all, why?

Mildred – Why what?

Socrates – The *why* of the question, “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Mildred – Oh yes, of course...

Josie – Hey! I said you could listen to Socrates' answer, but he's talking to me, all right? They're *my* bananas, after all, so mind your onions! Or your carrots...

Socrates – Right, may I continue?

Mildred – Apologies...

Socrates – So, the *why* in this question is already problematic. It assumes that the existence of the world must have a purpose, and moreover, one that is comprehensible to humans because it aligns with humanity's own purpose.

Mildred – Which is, quite evidently, a highly anthropocentric perspective.

Socrates – Humanity is only a part of the universe, and it's clear that a part cannot grasp the whole.

Josie – Of course...

Socrates picks up an orange.

Socrates – Take this orange, imagine it as the cradle of humanity, and ourselves as its seeds. Do you seriously think these seeds could understand how the shop operates?

Josie – No, obviously not...

Socrates – Even I, as the shopkeeper, sometimes wonder how it all works...

Mildred – I can't remember who said, “The Earth is blue like an orange.”

Josie – What's that got to do with anything? We're talking about seeds here!

Socrates – Plant this seed, it will grow into an orange tree that produces more oranges. With a bit of genetic or poetic manipulation, you could create blue oranges. But an orange seed will never grow into a banana tree.

Josie – And most importantly, an orange seed will never open a greengrocer's shop.

Socrates – Now, let's address the “nothing” in this question: “Why is there something rather than nothing?”

Josie – Exactly.

Socrates – Nothing is something that doesn't exist, wouldn't you agree?

Josie – How could anyone disagree with that?

Socrates – It follows, then, that asking if nothing could exist instead of something is a contradiction in terms.

Mildred – What philosophers call a sophism.

Josie gives her a fiery look.

Socrates – In reality, nothing is an empty concept. Since nothing doesn't exist, why talk about it as if it were a possible alternative to something?

Josie – That goes without saying...

Socrates – Nothing is an illusion invented by those who, like adherents of all monotheistic religions, want us to swallow the myth of creation.

Josie – A myth that involves the idea of a beginning, before which there was nothing.

Socrates – An idea that, you'll admit, is remarkably naive.

Mildred – Why's that?

Socrates – Because it's obvious that if something exists, that something has always existed in one form or another!

Josie – As Lavoisier said: “Nothing is lost, nothing is created, everything is transformed.”

Socrates – You know, I have a principle never to use quotes...

Mildred – Like Socrates.

Josie – Who could Socrates have quoted?

Mildred – The Presocratics...

Josie – And the Presocratics?

Mildred – No one.

Josie – And yet, they didn't talk complete nonsense!

Socrates – As for the notion of a beginning, it was invented by humans to bring the universe in line with their own anthropocentric worldview.

Josie – I see—humans are born and die, so they assume the same must apply to the universe.

Socrates – And why not, for that matter! Provided we accept that there are no births, only rebirths, and no deaths, only regrets.

Mildred – That time isn't linear but circular, that the Big Bang is perpetual motion, and the universe an engine of explosion!

Socrates – Why, when faced with two hypotheses, do we always choose the least likely one, simply because it fits the limitations of our narrow, mythological thinking?

Josie – Only to be surprised that the questions arising from this improbable hypothesis remain unsolvable...

Socrates – Unless we invent new mythologies to explain these mysteries, and so on. This long wandering of thought we call religion.

Mildred – At least some Eastern philosophies, by dispensing with transcendence, have managed to avoid this pitfall... So, are you a Hindu?

Socrates – I might be, if Hinduism hadn't also invented that appalling system of oppression known as the caste system.

Josie – Another way to justify the privileges of masters by making their slaves dream that in another life, instead of being the wound, they'll be the knife. To quote Baudelaire...

Mildred – When it comes to cementing their domination over the masses, religions are never short of imagination.

Josie – Sadly, for both religion and philosophy, after the often sincere pioneers, we swiftly move to decadence and exploitation.

Mildred – And religions can't help but fall into folklore to attract customers.

Josie – Not to mention, they always produce kitschy art of extreme bad taste.

Mildred – Personally, between the Sistine Chapel and the Lascaux Caves, there's no contest...

Josie – Roman Catholicism is to Jesus Christ what bureaucratic Stalinism is to Karl Marx.

Mildred – And the Vatican is its Kremlin.

Socrates – Some people have always found it advantageous to ask unanswerable questions...

Mildred – Speaking of which, I wanted to ask if...

Josie – When it's your turn, all right?

Socrates – Let's finish with the final element of this question: why is there something rather than nothing? *Something*. That's all that remains once you've eliminated all the extraneous elements in the question, turning it into a statement. *Something*: that's all there is to say.

Josie – But is it even necessary to say it?

Mildred – It reminds me of Fernand Raynaud's joke about that advertising slogan: "Here we sell beautiful, cheap oranges..." Once you remove all the tautologies in that sales pitch, you're left with the plain fact of the oranges.

Socrates – Fernand Raynaud was the greatest philosopher of all time...

Mildred – So, in the end, we return to Descartes' statement: *I think, therefore I am*.

Socrates – That's another tautological phrase, brimming with egocentrism. Why not say *I think, therefore I think*? It isn't us doing the thinking. The world thinks through us. And clearly, the world also often thinks poorly...

A pause, as the two women absorb the depth of what has just been said.

Josie – It's amazing that your name is Socrates... It's a predestined name, isn't it?

Socrates – It's not my first name. It's my surname.

Mildred – A portuguese one, right?

Socrates – Have I answered your question?

Josie – Absolutely, Socrates.

Socrates (*returning to Josie's bananas on the scale*) – One pound... (*He picks a book from a crate and adds it to the scale.*) And one book more makes it a kilo.

Josie – What's that?

Socrates – *Discourse on the Method*. It's so absurd it's almost funny. Next question?

Mildred – Now, I'm not sure if...

Socrates – Go ahead, let's see.

Mildred – Right, I... Okay, here goes... Does God exist?

Socrates and Josie give her a pitying look.

Socrates – I thought I'd already answered that question...

Mildred (*sheepishly*) – Yes, I thought so too, but... (*To Josie*) If you hadn't asked your question before mine! Now it's easy to make me look like an idiot...

Socrates – Come now, I'll answer your question anyway.

Mildred – Thank you... (*She gives Josie a sour look.*)

Socrates – Does God exist? Depending on who's asking, it's either a profoundly stupid question or a deeply perverse one.

Mildred – I'm not sure I follow...

Socrates – Asking if God exists presumes you've first defined what God is. How can you ask if something exists when you don't know what it is? I challenge you to give me a definition of God other than “God is God.”

Mildred looks flustered, while Josie smirks ironically.

Mildred – Oh, all right, enough...

Socrates – Since God is considered a concept no other concept can define, the only question we can ask about God is whether or not He exists. But even asking if God exists is the only way to make the concept hypothetically exist. Do you follow me this time?

Mildred – I'm trying...

Socrates – Do unicorns exist? Answer!

Mildred – Unicorns? Well... No, obviously not.

Socrates – And yet, asking if unicorns exist already gives them virtual existence. You can then tell fantastical stories about them, write children's books, even paint pictures displayed in museums. Have you ever seen a painting of dinosaurs at the Louvre?

Mildred – No, I haven't.

Socrates – And yet dinosaurs really existed. For humans, a recent fable often holds more reality than a distant truth.

Josie – So God exists in the imagination of the humans who created Him, just like unicorns.

Socrates – As for whether God exists, it boils down to asking whether we need this hypothesis to comprehend the world as our limited intellect allows.

Mildred – And?

Socrates – That's where I've already answered your question.

Josie – The idea of God is only necessary if you accept the improbable hypothesis of linear time, implying a beginning and a creation of the world by a first cause and for a final purpose.

Mildred – So God doesn't exist, and Pascal lost his wager...

Socrates – It was a foolish bet...

Josie – A circular time... Then the creation of the world is a bit like the chicken-and-egg problem.

Socrates – Do you want these carrots?

Josie – Yes, yes, of course...

Socrates weighs the carrots.

Socrates – One pound... (*He picks another book from the crate and adds it to the scale.*) And one book more makes it a kilo.

Mildred – What's that? Pascal's *Pensées*?

Socrates – It's a cookbook. It'll be much more useful for figuring out how to cook those carrots, believe me...

Josie hands him some coins, which Socrates accepts. He retreats into the shop, leaving the two women speechless.

Mildred – What a man!

Josie – You could say he's elevated the greengrocery trade to the level of maieutics.

Mildred – Right, I'd better go make my soup.

Josie – Now where on earth did I leave my dog? Have you seen him by any chance?

Mildred – I didn't even know you had a dog...

Josie – God!

Mildred – Your dog's name is God?

Josie – At least I'm sure he exists. And when I call him, he comes.

Mildred – Point proven...

Josie – God! Come here, boy.

Mildred – Faith is all that saves us...

Josie – Where's that mutt gone now? I'll take you to the pound, just you wait... it won't take long.

Mildred – Right, I'll leave you to it... See you around...

Mildred exits. Josie walks away too, still calling for her dog.

Josie – Heel! I'm not going to get down on my knees, for crying out loud! God! Wait until I catch you—you're getting a good hiding!

Billy enters, looking shifty, dressed like a thug. He wears a beanie, and after glancing around, he pulls it down to reveal it's a balaclava. He takes a revolver from his pocket and enters the shop. Nothing happens for a few moments. A dog barks, tyres screech, and then silence. Billy reappears, looking sheepish. His balaclava is off, and he's followed by Socrates, who is holding the revolver by the barrel.

Socrates – Well, for once, I'll indulge in a quote, my young friend. You know the saying: “*He who steals an egg steals an ox*”?

Billy – My teacher used to say that a lot during moral lessons at school.

Socrates – It seems you didn't quite grasp the lesson...

Billy – I'm really sorry, sir.

Socrates – And what do you think that proverb means?

Billy – I don't know... It means the first step is the hardest... You start by stealing an egg, and next thing, you're stealing the whole ox...

Socrates – So?

Billy – So it's best not to steal anything, not even an egg...

Socrates – That's probably the interpretation your teacher gave you.

Billy – Isn't that what it means?

Socrates – You could see it that way, yes... But it could also mean the opposite.

Billy – The opposite?

Socrates – *He who steals an egg steals an ox* could also mean that stealing an egg is just as serious as stealing an ox, no? That it's equally grave.

Billy – Uh... yes...

Socrates – After school, I bet you went to catechism, didn't you?

Billy – I was even an altar boy... That's where I started stealing communion wine, actually...

Socrates – And what do the Ten Commandments say about stealing?

Billy – *Thou shalt not steal*. I think it's the Seventh Amendment...

Socrates – The Seventh *Commandment*, actually. The Seventh Amendment in the U.S. Constitution is the right to a fair trial. But it's more or less the same idea, isn't it?

Billy – A fair trial...

Socrates – Either way, the Bible doesn't say, *Thou shalt not steal an egg, and certainly not an ox*. The Bible doesn't deal in retail. Stealing an egg or an ox—it's all the same, no matter the size of the ox. It's a mortal sin, full stop. Cross my heart, hope to die—steal, and you'll fry in hell. Am I right, son?

Billy – Yes, sir...

Socrates – And it's the same from the legal perspective. Theft is theft. The penalty is the same regardless of the loot's value, isn't it?

Billy – I suppose...

Socrates – If it's armed robbery, it's a trial in a higher court. And if it's a repeat offence, it's life in prison...

Billy – Oh... That's... harsh.

Socrates – Do you think it's worth risking life imprisonment for the few euros you might have found in my cash drawer?

Billy – No, not really...

Socrates – Good. You're starting to think sensibly... Now, do you see the bank over there?

Billy – Yes, sir...

Socrates – If you're going to risk spending your life in prison, wouldn't it make more sense to go for what's in the vault?

Billy – I suppose so...

Socrates – A little ambition, for heaven's sake! Aim higher, old chap! But no unnecessary violence. And as for *Thou shalt not kill*, it's the same story. It doesn't cost you any less if the person you kill was unsavoury, and no one will miss them...

Billy – I understand, sir, I swear...

Socrates puts the revolver in his pocket.

Socrates – Right, I'll keep your gun for now...

Billy – Can I go? You're not calling the police?

Socrates – Go on, lad. And remember: *He who steals an egg steals an ox*. So why not just go for the ox?

Billy – An ox...

Socrates – Or a hen, if you prefer to start small. At least you'll get eggs every morning without risking prison every day.

Billy – You really think a hen?

Socrates – Why do you think we talk about chicken thieves and not egg thieves?

Billy – I don't know, sir...

Socrates – That's probably how capitalism began—someone stole a hen and started selling eggs. Get it?

Billy – Where can I steal a hen?

Socrates – You're right; hens are getting harder to find, especially in town. So, since you strike me as a bit of a nut, why not rob the squirrel?

Billy – Thank you, sir.

Socrates takes a leek from his stand and hands it to Billy.

Socrates – Here, take this. It might come in handy...

Billy – Thanks...

Socrates – And don't forget: *Property is theft!*

Billy – Yes, sir...

Socrates – Go in peace, my son... (*Socrates blesses him with the sign of the cross, and Billy leaves, thoroughly confused.*) These youngsters... You wonder what they're taught in school...

Socrates returns to his shop. Eve enters and stops to browse the crates of books. Charles appears, holding a map and looking lost.

Charles (*to Eve*) – Excuse me, I'm looking for Progress Alley... It should be nearby, but I might be mistaken...

Eve – Progress Alley? That rings a bell, but I'm not sure...

Charles – According to my map, you need to follow Lenin Alley, then continue along Karl Marx Street until you reach Che Guevara Avenue. Progress Alley should branch off Revolution Square...

Eve – Oh dear... My poor man, you're completely off track. How old is that map of yours?

Charles – I'm not sure... But in the city centre, streets don't change much, do they?

Eve – The streets, no... But let me see. (*She takes the map and examines it.*) 1955! Can you believe it?

Charles – What?

Eve – Since 1955, the Berlin Wall has fallen, the council switched political sides, and all the streets were renamed...

Charles – And?

Eve – So now you'll take Donald Trump Alley, continue along Karl Lagerfeld Street, and head to Marx Brothers Avenue. Progress Alley leads off Digital Revolution Square.

Charles – At least Progress Alley hasn't changed its name.

Eve – Where exactly are you going?

Charles – The National Centre for Scientific Research.

Eve – On Progress Alley? Oh, but that doesn't exist anymore!

Charles – It doesn't exist anymore?

Eve – It's the Church of Scientology now.

Charles – You're joking?

Eve – No. The National Centre for Scientific Research relocated. It's on Nostradamus Promenade now.

Charles – And where is that?

Eve – Go straight ahead, take the first left, and you'll see the cemetery. It's just opposite.

Charles – Right, well, thank you then.

Eve – You're welcome...

Charles leaves. Eve resumes browsing through the books. Socrates steps out of his shop.

Socrates – Looking for something in particular?

Eve – No, just browsing...

Socrates – Take your time... But I'd recommend the fresh produce—it's in season. Over here, unless you get lucky, you'll only find stale old ideas. Can I offer you an apple?

He picks an apple from a stand and hands it to Eve.

Eve – Thank you... *(She bites into the apple and continues browsing for a moment.)* Actually, yes... I've been looking for a book for years... But it'd be a miracle if you had it.

Socrates – Ah, miracles are what I do best.

Eve – It's a book that's long out of print. I check every second-hand bookstall I find, just in case. But there were so few copies sold...

Socrates – Go on, tell me...

Eve – It's a poetry collection called *Orphan Rhymes*.

Socrates – *Orphan Rhymes*...

Eve – A small self-published book from quite some time ago...

Socrates – There are no small books, only small authors... *Confidential Editions*, right?

Eve – You know this book?

Socrates – I had it in my hands not long ago. I even leafed through it...

Eve – And do you still have it?

Socrates – Sadly, I traded it last week for a pound of courgettes. Got to pay the suppliers somehow...

Eve – What terrible luck... Do you remember who you sold it to?

Socrates – Like some professionals, I have my regulars, but this one was a one-off. Haven't seen him since...

Eve – Can I leave you my number, just in case?

Socrates – My readers do sometimes return their books once they've finished them—usually because they've run out of things to read.

Eve hands him her business card, and he takes it.

Eve – And how does it work in those cases?

Socrates – I take the book back in exchange for a pound of fresh produce.

Eve – You're quite an unusual greengrocer...

Socrates – I trade, I sell, I buy... It's what we call small business. A pound of carrots for a paperback. It can go up to a kilo of green beans for a leather-bound book. Or even truffles for a gilt-edged edition.

Eve – The book I'm looking for was printed on recycled paper...

Socrates – Of course, the content matters too... The paper can be recycled, as long as the ideas printed on it aren't.

Eve – So, a pound of courgettes for *Orphan Rhymes*.

Socrates – It depends on the customer, really... I must've liked that one. Sometimes I even give my produce away or refuse to sell it. You know, rarity doesn't always equal value. If there's no demand, as with poetry... Have you read Adam Smith?

Eve – No...

Socrates – A Scottish economist. The Scots know their economics better than anyone... (*Noticing she's distracted*) All right, if I see that man again, I'll call you.

Eve – Thank you... And you say you leafed through the book?

Socrates – I read a few poems... I remember one in particular:

*The poppy dreams by the roadside,
off the field,
where no harvest awaits it.
Imperfect as an unfinished flower,
it is already coated with the dust of the world,
like flour.
Its yield is not fine white bread,
but moon croissant.*

Eve – Bravo! What a memory... So, did you like this poppy? Maybe not enough to keep it instead of trading it for courgettes, though...

Socrates – It struck me as sincere, at least... The least you can ask of a book is sincerity. Sadly, most books today feel like they're written straight from a literary cookbook.

Eve – Well, I won't take up more of your time...

Socrates – That's what people say when they're getting bored.

Eve – Well, see you soon, I hope...

Eve starts to leave. Socrates picks something from a crate.

Socrates – Here... A bunch of parsley... On the house.

Eve – Thank you. It's been a very long time since a man gave me a bouquet...

She leaves. Billy runs in, looking panicked, clearly being chased. Socrates understands the situation without a word being said.

Socrates – It seems your bank withdrawal didn't quite go as planned... (*Billy looks at him, distraught.*) Go to the back of the shop.

Billy rushes inside. Lieutenant Sanchez arrives with Detective Ramirez.

Socrates – Good day, Lieutenant. What brings you here?

Sanchez – Just routine, my good man... A robbery at the Savings Bank...

Socrates – I'm sure the two of you will catch the culprit in no time.

Sanchez – We're looking for him now. You haven't seen anyone suspicious, have you?

Socrates – That depends... What does he look like?

Sanchez turns to Ramirez.

Ramirez – He was wearing a balaclava, chief.

Socrates – I haven't seen anyone in a balaclava... Any injuries?

Sanchez – Oh no! A complete amateur. He fled and left his weapon behind.

Ramirez – We thought it was a sawed-off shotgun under his coat. But it turned out to be... a leek.

Socrates – A leek?

Sanchez – It wouldn't have come from your shop, would it?

Socrates – You know, I sell a lot of leeks. What size was it?

Sanchez picks up a leek from a crate and shows it.

Sanchez – About like this one.

Socrates – Ah yes, that could certainly cause some damage... (*Seeing Ramirez eyeing the crates of books*) Looking for a good book to take your mind off things?

Ramirez – Do you have any crime novels?

Sanchez shoots him a disapproving glance.

Sanchez – We don't have time for that. We're on duty.

Socrates – *The Leek Bandit*... Wouldn't that make a great title for a mystery novel?

Sanchez – So, you haven't seen anything?

Socrates – If I were you, I'd check near the cemetery. I saw a strange fellow running in that direction earlier.

Ramirez – You couldn't have mentioned this earlier?

Socrates – I thought he was out for a jog. But now that you mention it, he was running rather fast.

Sanchez – Thanks, anyway.

Sanchez and Ramirez head towards the cemetery. Socrates enters the shop and returns a moment later. He checks both directions before motioning for Billy to come out. He points in the opposite direction of the officers.

Socrates – Go that way if you want to avoid any unpleasant encounters.

Billy – Thank you.

Socrates – And a bit of advice: give up the life of a thief, even a chicken thief. Clearly, you're not cut out for such a noble profession...

Billy – I promise.

Socrates – I'm not suggesting you start working—that would be asking a lot—but...

Billy (*noticing the books*) – Maybe I should educate myself a little...

Socrates – Honestly, I wouldn't recommend reading. At your age, starting now could kill you...

Billy – I'd better get moving before the cops come back...

Socrates – Are you sure you're not forgetting anything?

Reluctantly, Billy pulls three packs of biscuits out of his pockets.

Billy – Sorry... Reflex.

Socrates takes the biscuits and hands Billy a fruit.

Socrates – Take a pear instead. You know, to stay healthy, you need five fruits and vegetables a day. With the leek, that makes two. You already look healthier. Now, off you go...

Billy leaves. Socrates goes back into the shop to return the packs of biscuits. Ethan arrives and browses the books. Eve returns and pauses to glance at the fresh produce. Ethan notices her and is visibly captivated.

Ethan – Excuse me, may I ask you something?

Eve (*warily*) – Yes...

Ethan – I feel like I've seen you somewhere before.

Eve – That's the best you could come up with?

Ethan – For what?

Eve – To chat me up!

Ethan – I'm not chatting you up... Well, I am, but... I really do feel like I've seen you before. The two aren't mutually exclusive, are they? Why can't I chat up someone I think I've seen before?

Eve (*starting to leave*) – Well, I don't know you, so if you'll excuse me...

Ethan – Wait a minute! I have another question to ask you...

Eve – Make it your last. This is your one chance. I'm listening...

Ethan – It's just... I said that to keep you here a bit longer... I'm terrified I won't see you again, but I can't think of anything to ask right now. If you give me a few more seconds, I'll come up with something...

Eve – By then, I'll already be gone...

Ethan – Or you could give me your address, and I'll write you my question when it comes to me. You can send me your reply by post...

Eve – Well, that's a first! An absolute stranger proposing a pen-pal relationship right off the bat.

She starts to leave.

Ethan – No! Wait! I've got it! (*He glances at the vegetables.*) I wanted to ask how to make a gratin dauphinois.

Eve – A gratin dauphinois?

Ethan – Why not? Gratin dauphinois is delicious. Sure, it's not exactly light, but it's so good...

Eve – So, just because I'm a woman, the first thing you think to ask is the recipe for gratin dauphinois? You're a horrible sexist!

Ethan – Now that's unfair... That wasn't the first thing I thought of, but you refused to answer my first question...

Eve – Which, if I remember correctly, was: *Haven't we met somewhere before?* Do you actually get anywhere with such a lousy chat-up line?

Ethan – Rarely, to be honest, but it's my style. What can I say? You can't change who you are...

Eve – Style is the man, as they say. And that's why I'll take my leave now.

Ethan – At least tell me your name...

Eve – Eve...

Ethan – I'm Ethan. And I won't say farewell because I'm sure we're meant for each other. Which, of course, means we're destined to meet again very soon...

Eve – And what makes you so confident?

Ethan – Ethan and Eve! It's a sign, isn't it?

Eve – Utter nonsense...

Ethan – Eve... I'll be sighing your name every night as I fall asleep alone in my bed. (*Eve walks away, hiding an amused smile.*) I saw you! You smiled!

Eve (off) – In your dreams.

Socrates steps out, holding a packet of biscuits.

Socrates – Want a biscuit?

Ethan – Thanks, but I avoid snacking between meals.

Socrates – Me too. That's why I cut out meals entirely—I love snacking too much. Haven't we met before?

Ethan – The last person I asked that accused me of trying to chat them up.

Socrates – Don't worry, you're not my type at all...

Ethan – I bought a book from you a while ago.

Socrates – *Orphan Rhymes.*

Ethan – That's the one.

Socrates – You didn't like it and now you're here to sell it back to me...

Ethan – Not at all. I loved it, actually. It's even become my bedside book:

*Our eyes, halves of squeezed oranges,
stream towards the hollow of absence.
They glimmer briefly, astonished
by the rise of the imminence of departure.*

Socrates – Oranges have always been a great inspiration to poets...

Ethan – Actually, I was wondering if you had anything else by the same author.

Socrates – I think that's their only book, but you never know. There might be a second one someday. As long as an author's alive, there's always the risk of another. So, you still have it?

Ethan – Of course, why?

Socrates – A young woman was here earlier looking for it.

Ethan – That's odd; it's not a very well-known book. I'd never heard of it before flipping through it at your shop. I even Googled the author but found nothing.

Socrates – Andy Warhol said everyone gets their fifteen minutes of fame. These days, true anonymity is a rare privilege... Would you be willing to sell it back to me?

Ethan – You're quite an unusual bookseller...

Socrates – People say that a lot. And as a greengrocer, don't get me started... I'll give you a kilo of tomatoes for it. If I remember correctly, I sold it to you for a pound of courgettes.

Ethan – You must not make much profit.

Socrates – For connoisseurs, I have a few mushrooms in the back that can add a little colour to life. Pricier, of course, but worth it—if you're interested.

Ethan – Sorry, I prefer my mushrooms in an omelette... I wasn't planning to part with the book, but if your customer wants it that badly... I could keep a photocopy and let her have the original.

Socrates – Perfect. I'll call her. When can you bring it by?

Ethan – I'll drop it off late morning. *(He looks at the produce.)* Are your tomatoes good?

Socrates – They're in season.

Ethan – And your melons? Do they really come from France?

Socrates – If we're lucky, they might pass through there... The truck that brings them comes from Morocco...

Ethan – I'll take a melon, then. Save me one?

Socrates – No problem. (*Ethan starts to leave. Socrates picks up a book and hands it to him.*) Here, you might find the recipe for gratin dauphinois in this.

Ethan smiles, takes the book, and leaves. Socrates pulls out his phone and steps into the shop while dialing a number. Sanchez and Ramirez return, Ramirez carrying a garbage bag over his shoulder.

Ramirez – Well done, Chief! Another case swiftly solved...

Sanchez – You're sure everything's there?

Ramirez – The coroner will tell us once he's pieced it back together... Can you believe it? Housewives over fifty robbing banks now... What's the world coming to?

Sanchez glances toward the shop.

Sanchez – Did you know this shop is run by a Portuguese man?

Ramirez – No...

Sanchez – Our job is to know everything, Ramirez. Every innocent man is just a guilty one who hasn't been caught yet...

Ramirez (*looking at the shop*) – Now that you mention it, Chief, that does seem odd.

Sanchez and Ramirez exit. Socrates steps out of the shop, still on the phone.

Socrates – Perfect, I'll see you later... (*He puts the phone away. Mildred returns.*)

Mildred – Haven't you heard?

Socrates – That depends... About what?

Mildred – Josie!

Socrates – Josie?

Mildred – The lady you sold *Discourse on the Method* to earlier!

Socrates – I didn't know her name was Josie. If I had, I wouldn't have sold her bananas either...

Mildred – And why's that?

Socrates – I make it a rule never to do business with Josies... But what's done is done. So, didn't she enjoy Descartes?

Mildred – She's dead, can you believe it?

Socrates – Not out of boredom, I hope? I'd feel a bit responsible...

Mildred – She was hit by a snowplough!

Socrates – A snowplough? In August?

Mildred – Apparently, they were taking it to the municipal garage for repairs...

Socrates – Well, such is fate...

Mildred – Believe me, it wasn't a pretty sight. If I hadn't seen her holding that book, I'd never have recognised her. I identified the body... Or, well, what was left of it...

Josie arrives.

Josie – What's with the faces? You look like you've seen a ghost!

The others stare, stunned.

Socrates – Didn't I say life is an eternal cycle?

Mildred – Aren't you... dead?

Josie (*to Socrates*) – Do I *look* dead?

Socrates – No more than usual...

Josie – People do tend to exaggerate.

Mildred – But I saw you by the garage with that book under your arm! Your arm was on one side of the road, and the rest of you was in pieces on the other!

Josie (*to Socrates*) – Oh, by the way, about that book! I couldn't get into it. It fell out of my hands after three pages...

Socrates – And now you want me to take it back.

Josie – No, I gave it to some poor bloke walking by. He seemed thrilled—started reading it right away. I told him it wasn't wise to read while walking down the street, but what can you do...

Mildred – That must be the guy with the snowplough.

Josie – He said *Discourse on the Method* would surely help him “restructure” himself...

Mildred – Judging by what I saw, he's more “deconstructed” now.

Josie – Well, anyway, I've got to go make my soup.

Mildred – And I need to start my Vichy-style beef and carrots...

Josie – I've heard of Vichy carrots, but this... Was it your grandmother's recipe?

Mildred – My grandfather's. He was a policeman. He invented it during the war.

They leave. Socrates tidies up his stall and goes back into his shop. Eve returns just as Charles arrives.

Eve – So, did you find the National Centre for Scientific Research?

Charles – Yes, yes, thank you. Nostradamus Promenade—it was exactly as you said.

Eve – So you're a scientist?

Charles – I used to be... I spent years working on the Big Crunch theory.

Eve – That sounds fascinating.

Charles – Do you know what it is?

Eve – No, but I didn't want to ask and risk sounding stupid... The only Crunch I know is a chocolate bar, but I doubt the National Centre for Scientific Research would care about that.

Charles – The Big Crunch is like the Big Bang, but in reverse.

Eve – That's extraordinary...

Charles – Unfortunately, it's a completely outdated theory.

Eve – I'm so sorry...

Charles – The latest data suggests the universe's expansion is accelerating.

Eve – Maybe it'll sort itself out? If there's anything I can do to help...

Charles – These days, I do side jobs for the police.

Eve – The police?

Charles – The forensic division. They asked me to identify the original creator of the universe in a plagiarism case...

Eve – That sounds even more exciting!

Charles – You think so?

Eve – No, I was just trying to be polite...

Charles – Besides, it goes against all my convictions. I've always been a staunch opponent of creationism.

Eve – I understand...

Charles – Anyway, I'd better get back to it...

Eve – Good luck with your research!

Charles leaves, looking despondent. Ethan arrives and runs into Eve.

Ethan – I've got it now! You're the author of *Orphan Rhymes*!

Eve – How do you know that?

Ethan – Your photo is on the back cover.

Eve – I didn't think anyone had read that book...

Ethan – I read it. And apparently, I'm not the only one, since I have an appointment here with someone who wants to buy it from me for a fortune. It's starting to become a hot commodity! The beginning of fame...

Eve – You think so?

Ethan – At least I wasn't lying when I said I'd seen you somewhere before!

Eve – That's me.

Ethan – You?

Eve – I'm the one who wants to buy your copy.

Ethan – Why would an author want to buy their own book?

Eve – My house went under...

Ethan – Your publishing house, you mean?

Eve – When you self-publish, it's the same thing...

Ethan – So your... house went bankrupt.

Eve – It sank, I tell you! I lived on a barge.

Ethan – Oh... You mean it literally sank?

Eve – I don't have a single copy left. I just wanted to recover one—it's a part of me, you know?

Ethan – I understand...

Eve – So?

Ethan – So what?

Eve – Would you be willing to sell it to me?

Ethan – That depends on the price...

Eve – You're a gentleman, you wouldn't take advantage of the situation, would you?

Ethan – I thought I was a horrible sexist...

Eve – How much do you want for it?

Ethan – Someone recently offered me a kilo of tomatoes for it.

Eve – And that's not enough for you?

Ethan – Let's just say I'd like something extra on the table.

Eve – Don't you mean under the table?

Ethan – Not in this case. I'll trade you the book for a dinner invitation. We can share this melon at a table.

Eve – Yours, of course...

Ethan – You just told me you don't have a house anymore... So, is that a yes?

Eve – I really want that book back.

Ethan – And I'm not parting with it easily.

Eve – Fine. Let's discuss it over a melon.

Ethan picks a melon from the stall, and they leave together. Socrates steps out of his shop.

Socrates – Love... always love...

Lieutenant Sanchez and Detective Ramirez arrive.

Sanchez – Are you talking about us?

Socrates – So, Lieutenant, any progress on your investigation?

Sanchez – The case is closed.

Ramirez – We found the fugitive.

Sanchez – He's dead. Run over by a broken-down snowplough.

Ramirez – The autopsy showed he was a cross-dresser who called himself Josie.

Sanchez – He was holding this. (*Sanchez hands Socrates Discourse on the Method.*) This wouldn't have come from your shop, would it?

Ramirez – Like the leek...

Socrates – *Discourse on the Method...*

Ramirez – Shows you can be both a crook and a philosopher.

Socrates – It works both ways. Philosophy is often just intellectual fraud...

Josie rushes in, flustered.

Josie – Oh my God, Lieutenant, I'm so glad to see you! I've lost my dog...

Sanchez – That's not usually the kind of case the police handles.

Josie – Please, Lieutenant... My grandfather was on the force, and I know you're an animal lover too.

Ramirez – What colour is your dog?

Josie – Orange.

Ramirez – Orange? You mean it wears an orange coat?

Josie – A coat! In this weather? What a strange idea...

Ramirez – You see all sorts of things these days, you know...

Josie – No, my dog's fur is orange.

Sanchez – So, you dye its fur?

Josie – Not at all! What makes you think that? It's its natural colour!

Socrates – May I ask her a question, Lieutenant?

Sanchez – Be my guest. If it helps with our investigation...

Socrates – Madam, what colour is the Lieutenant's hair?

Josie – Well, violet, of course!

Socrates – I think I've figured this out, Lieutenant.

Josie – But that doesn't get me my dog back!

Sanchez – Ramirez, handle this case, will you?

Ramirez (*leaving with Josie*) – What's your dog's name, madam?

Socrates – You seem preoccupied, Lieutenant.

Sanchez – I'm investigating something enormous... I'll tell you under strict confidentiality... And only because I have a particular fondness for the Portuguese. You understand?

Socrates – Not at all... But I promise to be as silent as the tombstone.

Sanchez – It's a plagiarism case.

Socrates – Involving one of my books?

Sanchez – Yes, among other things...

Socrates – Among other things?

Sanchez – Your fresh produce too...

Socrates – A plagiarism case involving fruits and vegetables?

Sanchez – I told you, it's enormous... Brace yourself: the plagiarism concerns the entirety of the universe.

Socrates – No!

Sanchez – It's all a massive counterfeit.

Socrates – And the original creator filed the complaint?

Sanchez – The creator? We're looking for them too, you see. The forensic police are on it.

Socrates – That's incredible... And what tipped you off, Lieutenant?

Sanchez – Again, everything I'm telling you is top secret. But I know I can trust your discretion, right?

Socrates – Of course...

Sanchez – The Ministry of Defence has reported the presence of a wandering unicorn in the area...

Socrates – A unicorn?

Sanchez – Apparently, it escaped from the herd...

Ramirez returns and catches the end of the conversation.

Ramirez – You see, a world where herds of unicorns roam freely can only be a counterfeit...

Socrates – Naturally.

Sanchez – Unless...

Socrates – Yes?

Sanchez – In your opinion, why does that lady who lost her dog see the world in such vibrant colours?

Ramirez – Maybe she's colour-blind...

Sanchez – Or maybe she's taken something hallucinogenic... By the way, I've heard your mushrooms are... rather explosive. I'm a fan of mushrooms. Mind if I take a look in your shop?

Socrates – Be my guest. After you...

They enter the shop. Eve and Ethan pass by again and stop.

Eve – Your melon was excellent.

Ethan – It's a French melon.

Eve – You're right, one must beware of imitations... Thank you for the invitation... and for the book.

Ethan – I really loved your *Orphan Rhymes*.

Eve – And yet, I only sold three copies. And I suspect my mother bought all three, just to resell them to keep food on the table.

Ethan – So, one can have a mother and still write *Orphan Rhymes*.

Eve – Unless we die before our parents, we're all destined to become orphans eventually, aren't we?

Ethan – Which is why, I suppose, we all search for a soulmate... Hoping she won't leave us before we leave her.

They walk off hand in hand, smiling foolishly. Sanchez and Ramirez emerge with Socrates, who is handcuffed.

Sanchez – Illegal mushrooms in your storeroom and a firearm in your cash drawer...

Socrates – If I told you I confiscated that revolver from a kid to stop him from doing something stupid, you wouldn't believe me, would you?

Ramirez – You realize what kind of trouble you're in, don't you?

Socrates – Are you going to sentence me to drink hemlock?

Sanchez – What's that?

Socrates – A poison. It's what Socrates, the father of philosophy, had to drink after his conviction.

Ramirez – And what was he accused of?

Socrates – Impiety and corrupting the youth... He could have escaped execution by fleeing, but he chose to accept his sentence to show that submission to the law is the foundation of justice.

Sanchez – I'm not the kind of policeman who preaches civil disobedience...

Socrates – From the very beginning, the worm was in the fruit of philosophy. Socrates already thought he was Jesus Christ...

Sanchez – That taste for ostentatious sacrifice did win them a certain kind of fame, though.

Socrates – Men have always loved martyrs. There's one for every day of the calendar. Do you know why you're going to take these handcuffs off me?

Sanchez – I didn't even know I was going to do that.

Socrates – But you will, believe me.

Sanchez – To avoid turning you into a martyr?

Socrates – Because you're not really a police lieutenant.

Sanchez – Really?

Socrates – No more than I'm a grocer or a bookseller.

Sanchez – What makes you think I'm not a Lieutenant?

Socrates – You just told me the whole world is a counterfeit... By that logic, you, as the lead investigator, can't be a real policeman either.

Sanchez – That's a fair point.

Socrates – Besides, I went to the theatre last night, and you were playing a lieutenant there, too.

Sanchez – It's my typecast role, apparently.

Ramirez – And what did you think of my performance as the supporting actor?

Socrates – Terrible as well...

Ramirez removes the handcuffs from Socrates.

Sanchez – They weren't real handcuffs anyway.

Ramirez (*looking at the audience*) – You think they will throw tomatoes at us?

Socrates – I hope so... I need to restock my produce stand.

Blackout.

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.

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 Rope
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
The Way 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
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
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

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
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
the savage beasts
Neighbours'Day
Nicotine
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not
cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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Avignon – December 2024
ISBN: 978-2-38602-292-0
<https://comediatheque.net/>
Play available for free download