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Requiem for a Stradivarius





Jean-Pierre Martinez

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Requiem for a Stradivarius

A comedy by Jean-Pierre Martinez

Clara is a brilliant young violinist at the height of her fame, while the career of her husband Léo, a pianist somewhat older than she is, is already behind him. Once her mentor and inspiration, he now acts mainly as her accompanist and manager. Their partnership, on stage and in life, is going through a crisis. Just as they are preparing to leave for a concert, an argument breaks out. For this special occasion, a wealthy patron has agreed to lend Clara a priceless Stradivarius. Then two armed intruders burst into their living room, turning a domestic quarrel into a home invasion...

Characters

Leo

Clara

Kevin

Cindy

The two intruders may be played by performers of either sex.

Possible casts:
2 men / 2 women, 3 men / 1 woman, or 1 man / 3 women.

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Act One

Scene One

The living room of a comfortable, well-to-do house belonging to two professional musicians. The furnishings suggest a bohemian lifestyle, with a carefully cultivated elegance beneath the air of casualness. A coffee table stands centre stage, in front of a folding screen with an evening gown draped over it. An abstract painting hangs on the back wall. In one corner is a music stand with sheet music. Clara, in her thirties and wearing a dressing gown, is on the phone. She looks a little uncomfortable and is trying to keep her voice down.

Clara – No, I haven't had a chance to tell him yet... Yes, I know... It just hasn't been the right moment... I promise, but I've got a concert tonight and I'm already terribly late... Yes, a charity gala organised by the foundation that's lending us the Stradivarius. It's the least I can do... I know... Yes, me too... Of course, but I really can't talk now... Right, I'll call you back... Love you too...

She puts her phone away just as her husband Léo enters. He is a little older than she is and impeccably, rather self-consciously dressed.

Léo – Are you ready?

Clara – As you can see...

Léo – We're not exactly early...

Clara – That's precisely what I was just saying.

Léo – To whom...?

Clara hesitates briefly.

Clara – Stanislas. He just called...

Léo – Good old Stan...

Clara – Old? He's younger than me. Which makes him much younger than you. Wasn't he one of your students at the conservatoire?

Léo – I was being ironic... I think the rhetorical term is antiphrasis. You know, saying 'I don't dislike you' when you really mean 'I love you'.

Clara – That's an understatement, actually, unless I'm mistaken...

Léo – An understatement...? Are you sure?

Clara – Like when you say 'we're not exactly early' when we're catastrophically late...

Léo – And what did he want, this good old Stan?

Clara – To talk about a project...

Léo – A project? What sort of project?

Clara – Listen... We've got a concert in a few hours and I'm nowhere near ready. Can we talk about this another time?

Léo – Is he your lover?

She takes a moment to answer.

Clara – You've got some nerve... You've cheated on me at least ten times, mostly with your students, and you have the cheek to ask whether I'm having an affair?

Léo – That was before we got married... Legally speaking, it hardly counts as adultery.

Clara – We've only been married for two years.

Léo – And I haven't cheated on you once since.

Clara – Because you're not quite as irresistible as you used to be?

Léo – Are we still discussing my sex appeal... or my career as a pianist, which I put on hold so I could make you the most sought-after violinist of your generation?

Clara – You really think this is a good time for a row?

Léo – So you would rather not answer my question about Stan.

Clara – I won't let you claim that you sacrificed your career for mine, Léo. Your career was already over when you decided to become my accompanist and manager.

Léo – How thoughtful of you to remind me.

Clara – We both know success doesn't last forever in this business. The wheel turns. You had your moment; now it's mine. And it's insulting to say I owe it all to you. I might have had a little something to do with it myself.

Léo – Of course...

Clara – I know perfectly well that one day I'll go out of fashion too. But right now I want to make the most of my success, to take on new challenges.

Léo – 'Take on new challenges'... You sound like a football star angling for a transfer. What challenges, exactly?

Clara – I've achieved almost everything I can in France. But I still have something to prove on the international stage.

Léo – And you think one of my former students is going to help you do that?

Clara – He's young. He's spent a lot of time in the United States. He sees things differently.

Léo – Whereas I'm just an old fool who's no use to you any more, holding you back from international stardom...

Clara – I didn't say that.

Léo – Then what are you getting at? Go on, I'm listening...

Clara – I'm playing too many concerts, Léo. Just for the fees. I don't have time to practise, to experiment, to think about what I really want to do with my career while the critics and the public are still interested in me.

Léo – Those fees pay for this house. For this life. You never complained before... Would you rather go back to playing in the subway?

Clara – I've never played in the subway. But why not? As long as it's in New York or Tokyo.

Léo – You're joking, surely...?

Clara – I want time to explore other music, meet other people, try new collaborations... And yes, perhaps play in the world's greatest concert halls.

Léo – So much for the romantic artist starving in a Paris attic... And I thought you were above such material concerns.

Clara – I still have dreams, Léo. Ambitions. Is that a crime?

Léo – No...

Clara – I need to experience things I've never experienced before. To feel alive again...

Léo – With Stanislas, presumably.

Clara – It's not just about that, and you know it. I'm tired. No, worse than tired. Weary of playing the same music in the same halls to the same audiences...

Léo – With the same partner...

Clara – We've slipped into a routine, Léo. A comfortable routine, yes, but a routine all the same.

Léo – And you only started finding me so boring after you met Stan...

Clara – I couldn't sleep last night. I heard something on the radio about black holes...

Léo – Black holes?

Clara – Apparently, when you get close to a black hole, time slows down.

Léo – Really?

Clara – Well, lately that's exactly how it feels. Time seems to be moving more and more slowly for me...

Léo – And I thought I was your guiding star... So now I've become a black hole. How reassuring... What do you suggest, then? I mean, for us. Assuming there still is an 'us'...

Clara – I don't know... I feel like a change of scene, Léo.

Léo – A change of scene? Is that your way of saying you want to change the leading man as well?

Clara – I want to slow down, Léo. Take back control of my life and my career. Fewer concerts, but more important ones.

Léo – We have commitments, you know. Bookings for the next three years... And once you've made a commitment, you're supposed to honour it.

Clara – Commitments...? You mean the ones you made on my behalf.

Léo – Forgive me... I thought a manager's job was to secure engagements and sign contracts.

Clara – Without even consulting me?

Léo – So you want a new manager?

Clara – Why not?

Léo – You broke through because of me, Clara. My connections.

Clara – And you still have a job because of me. I owe you nothing, Léo.

Léo – So all this is just your way of telling me you've got a lover. Younger. Funnier. More in touch with the times.

Clara – And why not? Do you imagine no other man could possibly find me attractive?

Léo – So you admit it... He's your lover.

Clara – He's a good friend.

Léo – I imagine that's another understatement...

Clara – Didn't you hear something in the garden?

Léo – Is that the best you can do to change the subject?

Clara – I'm sure I locked the door...

Léo – You're right about one thing: we can continue this conversation at a more convenient moment. For now, we have a gala to get to, and we still have to collect your violin.

Clara – At this rate I won't even have time to get a feel for it before the concert.

Léo – A Stradivarius is like a racing car. You can't just jump out of your little runabout, climb into a Formula One car and enter the 24 Hours of Le Mans...

Clara – Isn't Le Mans an endurance race, not Formula One?

Léo – It was a metaphor... Are you determined to ruin my evening?

Clara – Sorry...

Léo – Though you're right. Le Mans is an endurance race.

Clara – Like marriage...

Léo checks his watch.

Léo – If we leave now, we can still make it. In the Jaguar... Why don't you get dressed?

She is about to step behind the screen.

Scene Two

Suddenly, a masked young man and woman burst into the living room. The woman is holding a handgun and points it at them.

Cindy – On your knees! Hands up!

Stunned, Léo and Clara obey.

Clara – What's going on? What do you want?

The intruders ignore her and quickly look around, alert to every movement.

Léo – It's a home invasion, Clara. Isn't that obvious...?

Clara – A what?

Léo – An armed robbery in our own home! If you want an international career, you'd better keep up with the terminology.

Kevin – Shut the fuck up! Phones! On the table!

Léo and Clara put their mobile phones on the coffee table. Kevin picks them up and pockets them.

Cindy *(to Kevin)* – Check there's no one else in the house...

Kevin goes out.

Léo – There's no one here but us. We were just leaving...

Clara – Can I at least get dressed?

Cindy – We told you to shut up!

Léo – All right, let's stay calm and talk this through, shall we?

Clara – Perhaps you could start by telling us what you want...?

Léo – Money? I should warn you, we don't keep much cash in the house. Apart from a few notes in my pockets...

Clara – And I haven't got any expensive jewellery. No one ever thought of giving me any...

Cindy points the gun at her.

Cindy – Shut your fucking mouth!

Kevin returns.

Kevin – No one else. Just a black cat. Scared the shit out of me... Looked like a panther...

Cindy – A panther...?

Kevin – A little panther... How should I know? I've never seen a panther...

Clara – That's Bagheera. You should be careful. She can be dangerous with strangers...

Léo – She once bit a tax inspector. Just imagine what she'd do to burglars...

Clara – If I were you, I'd leave straight away.

Cindy – For fuck's sake, can't you put something in her mouth...?

Kevin – Something in her mouth...?

Cindy – A gag, for fuck's sake! She's busting my balls...

Clara – Now, what figure of speech would you call that? Any ideas, Léo?

Léo – How are we supposed to give you what you want if you won't tell us what it is?

Clara – And once you've told us, how are we supposed to answer if you've gagged us?

Kevin checks his phone.

Léo – They seem to be waiting for instructions...

Clara – Could we at least sit down? My legs are cramping up...

Cindy – Fine. Sit down...

Léo and Clara sit. Kevin taps away at his phone.

Cindy – Well?

Kevin – Right. Here we go...

Kevin and Cindy look around again as if searching for something.

Léo – We haven't got a safe, if that's what you're looking for.

Clara – But whatever we do have, you're welcome to take it.

Léo – Are you interested in painting? *(Indicating the picture.)* It's by a young Venezuelan artist. In thirty or forty years I'm sure it'll be worth something...

Clara – I've never liked it. Honestly, you'd almost be doing me a favour if you took it.

Léo – As long as you leave...

Clara – We're playing a concert in three hours. We should be on our way already...

Léo – We're only musicians, you know. We're not some new breed of cryptocurrency millionaires...

Clara – Cryptocurrency? I don't even know what that is...

Cindy – Save your breath. We didn't come for your cash.

Léo – Oh...? Then what do you want?

Kevin – Where's the violin?

Clara – The violin? My violin?

Léo – You've come to steal a violin?

Clara – Mine only has sentimental value! You wouldn't get more than a thousand euros for it second-hand.

Léo – Perhaps twelve hundred, if you tell them it belonged to the famous violinist Clara Mariani.

Clara – You'd make more money robbing the corner shop. I'm sure there's more in the till.

Cindy points her gun at Léo again.

Cindy – The fucking violin! You! Go and get it!

Clara – But what on earth do you want with my violin?

Léo – You're fans of Clara, is that it?

Clara – If that's all it is, I'll autograph one of my recordings for you and we'll call it a day. What are your names?

Léo – Would you like two tickets for tonight's concert? There is a dress code, mind you. You'll have to take off the masks, at least...

The two intruders do not even answer.

Cindy – Did you see a violin when you searched the house?

Kevin – I saw a piano. A huge black grand piano. The cat was asleep on top of it. It was black too, so I didn't notice it. Then I went over and it started growling...

Cindy – Growling? A cat?

Léo – The cat guards my piano. If you want to steal it, you'll have to get past Bagheera.

Clara – And you'll need some removal men.

Léo – No offence, but you don't exactly have the build for it.

Clara – It's a grand piano. And it has a tail... Just like the cat.

Léo – The cat...?

Clara – Its tail, Léo...

Léo – Oh, I see. I missed that.

Clara – So, what happens now...?

Kevin checks his phone, apparently awaiting instructions.

Léo – Perhaps they're planning to become a duo, like us.

Clara – A comedy duo, in that case...

Léo – They need a violin, can't afford one, so they've come to steal yours.

Clara – I do charity work myself, you know... If music means that much to you, I'd be happy to give you a student violin... And if you're that keen, I could even give you a few lessons. Free of charge, of course...

Léo – Give it a rest, Clara... I don't think these young people are here for the love of music.

Cindy – You think we're too stupid to play an instrument, is that it?

Clara – Not at all!

Kevin – As it happens, I play a bit of guitar. Cindy and I have a band.

Cindy – Brilliant. Why not give them my name? You might as well tell them where I live too...!

Kevin – It just slipped out... *(To Léo and Clara.)* Anyway, it's only a stage name...

Clara – Don't worry, we didn't hear a thing...

Léo – Come on, put the gun down and let's have a civilised conversation.

Clara – Since we're apparently all artists...

Kevin *(referring to his mask)* – Fuck, I can hardly breathe under this thing...

Léo – Because, frankly, when it comes to organised crime...

Clara – Your act still needs a little rehearsal.

Léo – Yes... Carry on like this and you'll end up behind bars. And not the musical kind.

Kevin's phone rings.

Kevin – Yeah...?

He goes into the adjoining room to answer. Cindy keeps the couple at gunpoint.

Clara – Can I get dressed while he's gone?

Cindy – You move from here and I'll shoot you...

Clara – I'm only going behind the screen!

Cindy hesitates.

Cindy – All right. Go on...

Clara changes behind the screen. Kevin returns. He took off his mask to answer the phone and has forgotten to put it back on.

Cindy – Your mask, for fuck's sake, Kevin...!

Kevin – Oh, shit... I was hot. Forgot to put it back on...

Cindy takes off her mask as well.

Cindy – Since they've seen your face, they might as well see mine. I'm not going to be the only one suffocating under this thing.

Clara emerges from behind the screen wearing a magnificent evening gown. Kevin stares at her, open-mouthed.

Cindy – Everything all right, Kevin?

Kevin – What...?

Cindy – You're practically drooling...

Clara – I told you, I'm performing tonight...

Kevin – Yeah, but now they've seen our faces, we're going to have to kill them both...

Cindy – Especially as you told them my name.

Kevin – And you told them mine, remember...

Léo and Clara exchange a look, unsure whether the two are serious.

Léo – You're not going to murder us over a violin!

Cindy – It's not your bloody violin we're after, you bitch.

Kevin – It's the Stratovarius.

Clara – The what?

Léo – That's what's known as a portmanteau word. I think he's crossed a Stratocaster with a Stradivarius!

Clara – Stratocaster...? What's that?

Léo – Really, Clara... It's the Stradivarius of electric guitars!

Clara – You've come for the Stradivarius?

Léo *(incredulous)* – So you actually know what a Stradivarius is...?

Cindy – We know it's worth a fortune. That's enough for us.

Clara – But it doesn't belong to us! Do you seriously think we can afford a Stradivarius?

Léo – Besides, it's not here.

Kevin – Oh, really?

Clara – It's with the patron who owns it!

Cindy – We know that.

Kevin – We also know you were supposed to collect it at three o'clock to rehearse before the concert.

Cindy – It's six o'clock now. So the violin must be here.

Kevin – You're going to hand it over, we'll leave, and everything will be fine...

Léo – You seem very well informed.

Clara – Apart from one small detail. The violin isn't here.

Kevin – Don't mess us about.

Clara – But we're telling you...

Léo interrupts her.

Léo – Leave it, Clara... All right, we'll give you the Stradivarius.

Clara looks surprised. Kevin's phone rings.

Kevin – Yeah...?

He goes out to answer.

Cindy – Neither of you move, all right?

Kevin returns for a moment.

Kevin – Can you come here a second?

Cindy – I'll be watching you from there. Either of you gets up, I'll shoot.

She follows Kevin out.

Léo – They've never seen a Stradivarius. Just give them your own violin. They won't know the difference...

Clara – What?

Léo – If we want them to leave, we have to give them something.

Clara – My violin?

Léo – It's not a Stradivarius! You said yourself it has no commercial value...

Clara – But it means something to me! My father gave it to me for my first concert.

Léo – We're not going to die for an ordinary violin!

Clara – It was a present from my father! It's a matter of principle...

Léo – Principle? Be reasonable, Clara! This isn't about handing a Resistance fighter over to the Gestapo to save our skins! We're not going to get shot just because you've never resolved your Oedipus complex with your father!

Kevin and Cindy return. Cindy aims her gun at Léo.

Cindy *(to Clara)* – Right, we've wasted enough fucking time. Now give us the fucking Stradivarius or I'll shoot him!

Clara hesitates.

Léo – Clara...?

Clara – All right. I'll get it...

She goes out.

Kevin – There you are. She loves you more than her precious bloody violin after all.

Léo – I've been counting. Between the two of you, you've said 'fuck' about ten times since you arrived. Is it a form of punctuation where you come from? Some regional dialect? Funny, I can't place the accent...

Cindy – Shut the fuck up!

Léo – Ah, there's another favourite expression... It doesn't exactly encourage conversation, if you don't mind my saying so...

Clara returns with her violin and hands it to Kevin.

Clara – There. Happy now?

Léo – You can leave now, can't you? I promise we won't give the police a description. I'm terrible at recognising faces anyway.

Clara – So am I. In our profession, we meet so many people. Imagine having to remember them all...

Léo – I bumped into my mother at a funeral recently. I didn't recognise her. And it was her funeral...

Cindy examines the violin.

Cindy – Not so fast... Is this really a Stradivarius?

Kevin examines it too.

Kevin – Doesn't say so anywhere...

Léo – No, of course not. Stradivarius violins are never signed. Anyone will tell you that...

Cindy – Then how can you tell?

Clara – Authenticating a genuine Stradivarius takes an expert. You need to examine the wood, the varnish, the construction...

Léo – The shape of the f-holes, especially.

Kevin – The what holes?

Léo – The f-holes.

Kevin – The effing holes...?

Clara – The openings on the front of the violin! They're called f-holes because of their shape. They allow the instrument to resonate and breathe, rather like a fish's gills.

Léo – Their shape also affects the colour of the sound.

Kevin – Sounds have colours now, do they...?

Clara – Yes... It's called synaesthesia. You know Baudelaire, the poet? He wrote about colours and sounds speaking to one another...

Léo – 'In a unity as deep as night and light, scents, colours and sounds answer one another'...

Cindy – And that's worth millions?

Kevin – It's not even new...

Clara – Stradivarius violins are priceless. Fewer than seven hundred survive.

Léo – And they're almost never for sale. That's one reason they're so expensive...

Kevin – We'll check that...

Kevin photographs the violin with his phone and sends the picture.

Cindy – If you're trying to screw us over, you're going to regret it.

They wait for a reply. A tense silence.

Léo – I take it the person who hired you is an expert...

Kevin's face freezes as he reads the reply on his phone.

Kevin – They're taking us for idiots! It's not a Stradivarius... It's just a fucking violin.

Kevin sets Clara's violin aside. Cindy points the gun at them again.

Cindy – We warned you!

Léo – All right, it's not the Stradivarius!

Kevin – Then go and get the real one, you bastard, or I'll put a bullet in you!

Clara – We told you it's not here, but you won't believe us.

Léo – It's true we were meant to collect it at about three, but we had to change our plans.

Cindy – You're lying again!

Clara – I swear we're not.

Kevin – If it isn't here, where the fuck is it?

Clara – I keep telling you. With the patron who's lending it to us specially for tonight's charity gala.

Léo – We were running terribly late. We were just about to collect it and go straight to the concert.

Cindy turns to Kevin.

Cindy – Search the house.

Kevin goes out.

Clara – You won't find anything.

Léo – You'd be better off leaving now. People will soon start wondering where we are. The police could turn up any minute.

Clara – I'm sure our phones have been ringing nonstop.

Cindy – Shut up, both of you. I don't need your advice. You're just trying to confuse us.

Léo – Who are you working for, anyway? I doubt stealing a Stradivarius was your idea...

Cindy – You think we're too stupid to think of it ourselves?

Léo – I'm not sure... There's a saying: 'Fools will try anything. That's how you spot them.'

Clara – Did you know two complete idiots stole Charlie Chaplin's body from his grave, two months after his death, and demanded a ransom from his family?

Kevin returns.

Kevin – No other violin anywhere.

Léo – There, you see? We're telling the truth.

Kevin – So what do we do?

Cindy – I don't know. We were told it would be here...

Kevin – Then let's get out of here. We've had it...

But Cindy is clearly not ready to leave.

Cindy – Where exactly is this fucking violin?

Clara – Exactly? In a safe at the billionaire's house. And believe me, you won't get into a place like that as easily as you got into ours. There are security cameras everywhere. Guards...

Kevin – And you were going to collect it on your way to the concert?

Léo – Yes.

Cindy *(to Kevin)* – Then he can go and fetch it!

Kevin – You think?

Cindy – What's the boss saying?

Kevin checks his phone.

Kevin – Still no reply... They probably don't know what to do... Same as us...

Cindy – We'll have to improvise.

Kevin – Let's kill them and get out.

Clara – If you kill us, you'll never get the violin!

Cindy – He goes to fetch it. She stays here.

Léo – But they're expecting both of us! They won't hand it over if Clara isn't with me!

Kevin – You never stop talking. I'm sure you'll think of something to tell them.

Cindy – You go and fetch the violin, come back here instead of going to the concert hall, and then we let you go.

Kevin – And don't come back with the police, or we'll kill her.

Cindy – We've got nothing to lose. We'd rather die than go to prison.

Léo – All right... Fine...

Clara – Are you sure...?

Léo – Do we have any choice...?

Kevin – Then get moving, for fuck's sake!

Léo goes out.

Cindy – Right... What the hell are we supposed to do while we wait?

Clara – Would you like me to put some music on?

Cindy – I'll take care of that...

Kevin – Got anything to drink around here?

Blackout.

Act Two

Scene One

The lights slowly come up. Loud punk music fades away. Clara is sitting on a chair. Kevin and Cindy pass a bottle of whisky back and forth, drinking straight from it.

Kevin – We make music too, you know. We've got a band.

Clara – Really...? How nice...

Kevin – We're called The Rebels.

Cindy – And now you've told her the name of our band as well.

Kevin – Nobody's ever heard of us anyway...

Clara – What do you play?

Kevin – Guitar.

Cindy – Drums...

Kevin – With the money from this job, we could buy some proper instruments...

Cindy – Not a Stradivarius, obviously, but...

Kevin – A Stratocaster.

Clara – I see... So that track you just played me was yours...

Cindy – Well? What do you think?

Clara – Oh, yes, it's... Did you record that with your band?

Kevin – Yeah... Cindy does the singing...

Cindy – It's not exactly chamber music, but...

Clara – No... You're more Kalashnikov than Rachmaninoff, if I've understood correctly...

Kevin – Gets you going, doesn't it?

Clara – I couldn't quite make out whether it was in B-flat minor or D-flat major...?

Kevin – So you didn't like it...

Clara – No, no, it's... very energetic... Very refreshing... Certainly a change from Chopin or Debussy... If anything, I'd say it was closer to... serial music. I mean the repetition. Are you familiar with Schoenberg?

Cindy – What time is it now?

Kevin – Half past seven.

Cindy – For your sake, I hope he comes back.

Clara – He will, I promise... He cares too much about me...

Kevin – Ah, true love...

Cindy – Can't live without you, can he?

Clara – No... And more to the point, he makes his living out of me.

Kevin – What?

Clara – Sometimes I feel like a performing monkey he parades around for money.

Cindy – Like a prostitute, then... So he's your pimp, is that it?

Clara – He's my manager... Though I suppose there isn't much difference...

Kevin – In that case he'll be back...

Cindy – Unless he decides to go solo and save his own skin.

A pause.

Clara – The thing is... we were in the middle of an argument when you arrived.

Cindy – Oh, yeah? About what?

Clara – He thinks I'm having an affair...

Kevin – And...?

Clara – And what?

Kevin – Are you?

Clara – That's none of your business!

Kevin – I wonder if we should've let him go...

Cindy – You'll soon find out how much he really cares about you.

Kevin's phone rings. He answers.

Kevin – Yeah...? No, there's been a bit of a setback...

He goes out to finish the call.

Clara – So you're doing this for someone else, aren't you?

Cindy – Shut up...

Clara – We can talk, can't we?

Cindy – Now you're going to tell me you want to help me, right?

Clara – Why not?

Cindy – We don't live in the same world, you and me. People like you don't give a damn about people like us.

Clara – The concert I'm supposed to give tonight is for a charity gala, you know...

Cindy – Oh, really...? There's a saying: charity begins at home. So we decided to help ourselves... Instead of standing around begging in the subway.

Clara – Before I became famous, I played in the subway too... There's no shame in asking strangers for money. But I offered something in return. My music. I can't stand people who simply hold out their hands either. Everyone has something to give. Even just a smile. A few lines of a song. Even if they can't sing in tune...

Cindy – Are you saying I sing out of tune?

Clara – Not at all! *(A pause.)* Well, a little, if we're being truthful... But you can learn to sing in tune. Like anything else...

Cindy – What, are you going to sing us a lullaby?

Clara – I could play you one of the pieces I was going to perform at the charity gala...

Cindy – Right... Like that violin player who lured the rats away and drowned them in the river...?

Clara – Actually, that was a flute player.

Cindy – Right, the Pied Piper. So you're trying to string us along, are you? We don't believe your lies any more. All those pretty speeches are just to lull people like us to sleep while you march us off to the slaughterhouse.

Clara – You're not entirely wrong. Teaching working-class children to appreciate middle-class culture can be a form of condescension... Insisting that young people from poor neighbourhoods learn classical music denies them the right to create their own culture. After all, jazz grew out of the music of enslaved people working on plantations, didn't it?

Cindy looks astonished by this speech, but Kevin returns.

Cindy – Well?

Kevin – They say we should've called the whole thing off...

Clara – That's what I told you.

Cindy – It's too late to back out now.

Kevin – How long has he been gone?

Cindy – About an hour...

Kevin – This is getting risky... How long are we going to sit here waiting?

Cindy – I don't know...

Kevin – They're right. Someone could turn up any minute. The police, maybe...

Cindy – If he's not back in fifteen minutes, we'll decide what to do...

Clara – How much are you being paid for a robbery worth millions? A few thousand euros? And you're the ones taking all the risks.

Kevin – Want me to gag her?

Cindy does not answer.

Clara – A violin like that can be traced, you know... You can't sell it at a flea market. They'll eventually find whoever ordered the theft, and you'll be left to pay the price for him... Do you know how many years you can get for armed robbery and kidnapping...?

Cindy – We don't have a choice. We weren't born with silver spoons in our mouths.

Clara – I was born in a working-class suburb of Paris.

Kevin – Even in the suburbs, some people live in nice houses.

Clara – Your employer doesn't seem very pleased with this improvisation. If things go wrong and somebody dies, he'll claim he only hired you for a burglary, not an armed robbery and hostage-taking.

Kevin – Is she ever going to shut up?

Clara – And if they ever catch him, he'll have the best lawyer money can buy. You'll have whoever the court assigns you... You'll get the maximum sentence. Who's behind all this?

Cindy – Even if I wanted to tell you, I couldn't.

Kevin – We've only got a phone number.

Clara – You're victims too. Someone's using you... Your names are Kevin and Cindy, aren't they?

Cindy – That's right. Some people are born Kevin and Cindy. Others are born Léo and Clara. And they don't start life with the same chances.

Kevin *(sarcastically)* – You're a star, so they told us. Perhaps we could be your opening act...

Clara – Why not...? I could introduce you to my producer. He works with contemporary music as well, you know... Or he could put you in touch with someone who specialises in your sort of thing.

Cindy – Of course. You'll make us famous, just like you...

Kevin – Right now, we need money. And we need it fast...

Clara – I could give you more than your boss is paying you.

Cindy – Don't try to mess with our heads. We're not that stupid.

Kevin – You do charity concerts, but you couldn't care less about poor people.

Clara – I'm not as rich as you think.

Cindy – You've forgotten what being truly poor means. Have you seen the house you live in?

Clara – You're probably right...

Kevin – The minute we're gone, you'll go straight to the police and describe us.

Clara – I won't even need to. You're not wearing gloves. You've left fingerprints everywhere.

Cindy – We'll clean them up before we leave. As for your description of us, well...

Kevin – We can still kill you.

Clara – You're not going to commit murder for a few thousand euros! Your own employer might turn you in just to avoid being implicated in it!

Cindy and Kevin hesitate.

Kevin – She's right. He doesn't give a damn about us either. He'll pocket a fortune, and if anyone ends up in prison, it'll be us.

Cindy – Don't let her talk you round...

Clara – Could I put some music on? My choice this time...

They do not answer. She starts the music. The three of them listen.

Cindy – Is that you?

Clara – Yes... A recording Léo and I made at the Salle Pleyel in Paris. With that very Stradivarius, as it happens...

Cindy and Kevin seem impressed.

Kevin – That's pretty good, isn't it?

Cindy – Yeah...

Clara – Unfortunately, it may be the last time this legendary instrument is ever heard in a concert hall...

Cindy – Trying to make us feel sorry for it now?

Clara – Whoever gets it will never dare take it out in public. Someone would recognise it at once and the thief would be arrested. And so would you...

Kevin *(to Cindy)* – That's bad, isn't it?

Cindy – Don't listen to her... She's playing you like a fiddle. She's even better at that than she is at the violin...

Scene Two

Léo returns carrying a violin case. Clara switches off the music.

Kevin – Took you long enough...

Léo – I had to explain why Clara wasn't with me... But I managed to get the violin.

Cindy takes the violin case.

Cindy – You'd better hope this is the right one...

She opens it. Clara leans over to inspect the violin.

Clara – Yes, that's the Stradivarius...

Kevin – We're checking anyway.

Kevin takes the violin out of its case.

Clara – Please be careful with it. It's a unique instrument, and terribly fragile.

Kevin photographs the violin and sends the picture. Cindy takes the instrument in her hands.

Cindy – How can this thing be worth millions? It's not even new...

Clara – These instruments are exceptional. So few remain, and one almost never comes up for sale.

Kevin – So how much would it actually fetch?

Clara – Several have sold for between ten and twenty million over the past decade.

Léo – They're sometimes stolen too. But sooner or later they always turn up again.

Kevin takes the Stradivarius back and strums its strings as though it were a guitar. It makes a dreadful noise.

Kevin – Sounds pretty rubbish, doesn't it?

Léo is furious.

Léo – That violin is over three hundred years old! Only the greatest virtuosos have the privilege of playing it. Show some respect, you morons!

A tense moment. Cindy points the gun at Léo again. Then a message arrives on Kevin's phone. He reads it.

Kevin – This time it's the real Stradivarius.

Cindy – Right. Let's get out of here.

Kevin – What do we do about them?

Cindy hesitates.

Cindy – You promise you won't give the police our descriptions?

Clara – I'll say you were wearing masks.

Kevin – What about the fingerprints?

Cindy – Our prints aren't on record anyway.

Léo – Not yet...

Cindy *(to Clara)* – I trust you. But what about your pimp...?

Léo looks taken aback.

Clara – He'll do exactly as I tell him. Believe me.

Kevin – If you turn us in, I swear we'll come back and finish the job... We've got nothing to lose, you know...

Cindy – Besides, what do you care? The violin isn't yours. The insurance will pay for it.

Kevin tries to put the violin back in its case, but it slips from his hands and falls to the floor. Clara is furious.

Clara – You complete idiot!

Kevin – A minute ago you were offering to let us open your next concert, and now we're idiots again...

Cindy puts her gun on the table as she bends down to inspect the violin.

Cindy – Careful! If it's broken, we don't get paid.

They examine the violin for damage. Taking advantage of the confusion, Léo grabs the gun from the table and points it at the intruders.

Léo – Hands up!

Cindy and Kevin obey.

Kevin – Careful! Are you sure you know how to use that thing...?

Cindy *(defiantly)* – What are you going to do? Kill us?

Léo – Why not? Humanity wouldn't exactly miss you! And no one would blame us, believe me.

Clara – We'd plead self-defence.

Léo – We'd probably be hailed as heroes...

Kevin – Yeah... But you're good Christians, aren't you? Maybe even left-wing... I saw one of those highbrow magazines lying around...

Clara – Don't trust Christians. They gave us the Crusades and the Inquisition.

Léo – And don't trust the left either. Stalin and Pol Pot were on that side, remember.

Cindy – They're blanks anyway.

Clara – Really?

Cindy – We weren't going to risk killing someone over a fucking violin!

Léo – Blanks, really? Then why are your hands up when I point the gun at you?

Kevin – I dunno... Reflex...

Léo – You're lying.

Kevin looks uncomfortable.

Cindy – They are blanks, aren't they?

Kevin – Yeah, well... I think so...

Cindy – You think so?

Clara – They're lying.

Léo – How can we tell?

Cindy – Why don't you fire it?

Kevin takes a step forward. The gun goes off. He is wounded.

Léo – Shit, I'm sorry! It just went off...

Cindy – They weren't blanks?

Kevin – The guy who sold me the bullets only had three blanks. The rest are real... I can't remember what order I put them in the cylinder...

Clara – Now we really must call the police.

Cindy – Don't do that!

Clara – Or at least an ambulance.

Kevin – Keep the violin, just let us go. Please...

Léo – But he's hurt. He needs treatment... If he dies, it'll be my fault...

Clara examines the wound.

Clara – It's not that bad. The bullet just grazed him. It's only a scratch...

Léo – Yes, but this is still an armed robbery...

Clara – Handing these two idiots over to the police... That's not like us, Léo. It certainly isn't like me. They'll go straight to prison.

Léo – That's exactly where they belong, Clara! In prison!

Léo reaches towards Kevin to retrieve his phone.

Clara – If you call the police, we're finished.

Léo hesitates, then lowers his hand.

Léo – Fine... Have it your way...

Clara – I think they've learnt their lesson...

Léo – You're remarkably optimistic...

Clara – It's your first robbery. We're giving you a chance to go straight...

Cindy – All right...

Clara – And 'thank you' wouldn't hurt, would it...?

Kevin – Thank you, ma'am...

Léo – Try stand-up comedy instead. I'm sure you've got real potential.

Clara – And tell whoever hired you never to take such terrible risks over a mere violin again. Even a Stradivarius...

Cindy and Kevin prepare to leave.

Léo – Just a minute...

Kevin – What?

Léo – Our phones!

Kevin hands the phones back.

Kevin – Can I have the gun back? It's borrowed...

Léo keeps the gun.

Léo – Get out before I change my mind...

Kevin and Cindy leave.

Scene Three

Clara and Léo stand frozen for a moment.

Clara – Have they really gone?

Léo – I think so...

Clara – I feel as though I'm waking from a nightmare. Did all that really happen?

Léo – There are a few drops of blood on the carpet...

Clara – Anyway, it's over.

Léo – We could still call the police...

Clara – We've got a concert in an hour... If we call them, we'll have to wait here. They'll search the house from top to bottom. We'll have to give statements... The gala will have to be cancelled.

Léo – The hall must already be full.

Clara – Yes... We'd have to refund everyone...

Léo – What's this charity gala raising money for again?

Clara – Orphans with so-called orphan diseases... Or something like that...

Léo – Orphans...? Are you sure?

Clara – That's what I understood.

Léo looks uncertain.

Léo – We've just been held up. In our own home!

Clara – But now that we're out of danger...

Léo – You make it sound as though a storm has just passed over. It was an armed attack, Clara! We could have been killed!

Clara – Yes. But we're safe. The violin's intact. And I gave them my word.

Léo – Your word? To those two lunatics!

Clara – You said yourself they don't know what they're doing.

Léo – Which strikes me as a very good reason to take them off the streets!

Clara – 'Forgive them, for they know not what they do.' That's what Jesus said about the people about to crucify him. And here we are, dressed for the evening, about to go to a fashionable society event...

Léo – That's the first time I've ever heard you quote the Bible. You're worrying me, Clara...

Clara – I don't know... Perhaps this experience will change us...

Léo – Let's say they're irresponsible fools. But what about the person who hired them?

Clara – They don't even know who it is! Probably some collector who's taken every possible precaution to remain anonymous.

Léo – And what if they try again?

Clara – I think they've had enough. I doubt they'll try another robbery. *(A pause.)* Besides, we've still got the gun...

Léo looks at the gun he is still holding.

Léo – That's right, the gun... What are we going to do with it?

Clara – We could keep it. Just in case.

Léo – You're joking?

Clara – You're right. Let's throw it in the river.

Léo – Usually it's not the victims who dispose of the weapon. I feel as if we're the criminals now...

Clara – Yes...

Léo – So what do we do?

Clara – I don't know...

Léo – We could keep it.

Clara – The gun?

Léo – The Stradivarius. We tell the police those two idiots made off with it... Without giving any detailed descriptions. Nobody loses out...

Clara – Except the insurance company...

Léo – Oh, insurance companies... They're the real thieves, aren't they?

Clara – And what would we do with it?

Léo – Sell it!

Clara – To whom? We'd be caught immediately.

Léo – Then we'll keep it. Our little secret. You could play it in private, just for me... I don't know why, but I'm getting excited already... Or perhaps it's the adrenaline... You know, Eros and Thanatos...

She stares at him, astonished. Then her phone rings and she answers.

Clara – Hello...? Ah, good evening... Yes, of course... Yes, everything's fine... Don't worry, we're on our way... A bit of traffic, but we'll be there just in time... That's right... See you soon...

She puts the phone away.

Léo – 'We're on our way'...?

Clara – I'll get my bag and we'll go...

Léo – Where?

Clara – To give our concert!

Léo – As if nothing had happened?

Clara – Calling the police would only complicate things, believe me. We'd have to explain ourselves... You could even come under suspicion.

Léo – Me? Suspected of what?

Clara – Of organising the whole thing yourself. After all, you went to collect the violin, not me...

She makes to leave.

Léo – What if it was Stan...?

Clara – Stan?

Léo – The one behind the robbery.

Clara – You're mad...

Léo – He knew our schedule. He knows the house. He could tell your ordinary violin from a Stradivarius. And he could probably find a collector willing to buy it...

Clara – You're imagining things, Léo... Is this jealousy?

Léo – Wait... What if you're in on it with him...?

Clara – What?

Léo – That would explain why you're so determined not to involve the police.

Clara – You've completely lost your mind...

Léo – You were planning a new life together with the money. Things went wrong with those two idiots, and now you want to bury the whole affair.

Clara – But you saw they didn't even know me!

Léo – Probably no more than they know Stanislas. That's how these robberies work. The person who commissions them stays in the shadows. Usually he's never found, and only the hired hands end up in prison.

Clara – You read too many crime novels...

Léo – It makes sense, doesn't it? If he really is your lover...

Clara – Fine... So what? Are you going to report us to the police?

He points the gun at her.

Léo – Or perhaps I'll take this chance to kill you... I could blame those two bunglers. No one would question my version. I'm the victim, after all.

Clara – Be careful with that gun. It could go off by itself, like before...

Léo – My lawyer would plead accidental homicide. At worst, a crime of passion. Judges can be very sympathetic in those cases...

He continues to aim the gun at her.

Clara – Didn't they say it was loaded with blanks?

Léo – Not all of them, apparently...

A moment of hesitation.

Clara – I think this whole ordeal has brought us closer together, after all.

He lowers the gun.

Léo – You think so?

Clara – It certainly puts a few things into perspective, doesn't it?

Léo puts the gun on the table, then examines the Stradivarius.

Léo – It's obscene, really, for a violin to be worth that much money.

Clara – Absolutely...

Léo – Well, you were complaining about being stuck in a routine...

Clara – Yes...

Léo – I heard what you said earlier, you know... We'll make a fresh start. I promise.

Clara – All right... But we really have to go now.

Léo – Right... Let the music begin...

Violin music is heard.

Clara – Don't forget the Stradivarius.

He puts the Stradivarius back in its case and picks it up.

Léo – There is one thing you still haven't answered, though...

Clara – What?

Léo – Stanislas... Is he really your lover?

They stare into each other's eyes.

Blackout.

The End

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2
A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

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

Comedies for 4
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A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
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Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more
At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

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

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

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