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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, a brilliant young violinist at the height of her fame, lives with Leo, a pianist a little older than she is, whose glory days are already behind him. Once her Pygmalion, he is now merely her accompanist and manager. The couple, on stage and off, is in crisis. Just as they are about to leave for a concert, where a generous patron has lent Clara a priceless Stradivarius, a pair of burglars suddenly burst into their living room...

Characters

Leo

Clara

Kevin

Cindy

*As the burglars' gender is not specified,
possible casts are: 2M/2F, 3M/1F, 3F/1M.*

Act 1

Scene 1

The living room of an upper-class couple of musicians. The furniture and decoration suggest a bohemian atmosphere, tinged with deliberate refinement under a veneer of casual ease. A coffee table stands centre stage, in front of a screen on which an evening dress has been laid out. An abstract painting adorns the back wall. In one corner, a music stand with sheet music. Clara, in her thirties, wearing a dressing gown, is on the phone. She looks slightly embarrassed and is making an effort to remain discreet.

Clara – No, I haven't had time to talk to him about it yet... Yes, I know... Let's just say it wasn't the right moment... I promise I will, but I've got a concert tonight and I'm already horribly late... Yes, a charity gala organised by the foundation that's lending us the Stradivarius. I rather owe them that... I know... Yes, me too... Of course, but I really can't talk now... That's right, I'll call you back... Me too, kisses...

She puts away her phone just as Leo, her husband, enters the room. He is a man slightly older than she is, with a sophisticated elegance.

Leo – Are you ready?

Clara – As you can see...

Leo – We're not exactly early...

Clara – No, that's precisely what I was just saying.

Leo – To whom...?

Clara hesitates slightly.

Clara – Stanislas. He just called...

Leo – Good old Stan...

Clara – Old? He's younger than I am. And therefore much younger than you. I even think he was one of your students at the music conservatory, wasn't he?

Leo – That was ironic... In rhetoric I believe they call it *antiphrasis*. You know: “I do not hate you”... meaning I love you.

Clara – That's more of a *litotes*, if I'm not mistaken...

Leo – A *litotes*...? Are you sure?

Clara – Like when you say “we're not exactly early” to mean we're dreadfully late...

Leo – And what did he want... this old Stan?

Clara – To talk to me about a project...

Leo – A project? What kind of project?

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

Leo – Is he your lover?

She takes a moment before replying.

Clara – You've got a nerve... You cheated on me at least ten times, mostly with your students, and you dare ask if I've got a lover?

Leo – That was before we got married... Technically, that doesn't count as adultery.

Clara – We've only been married two years.

Leo – But I haven't cheated on you since.

Clara – Because you're not such a success anymore?

Leo – Are we talking about my charm... or my career as a pianist, which I put on hold to make you the most sought-after violinist of your generation?

Clara – So you think now's the right time for a domestic row?

Leo – So you'd rather not answer me about Stan.

Clara – I can't let you claim you sacrificed your career to let me succeed, Leo. Your career was already behind you when you decided to become my accompanist and my impresario.

Leo – That's very tactful of you to remind me.

Clara – We all know in our profession that success never lasts. The wheel turns. You had your moment of glory, now it's my turn. And it's rather insulting to tell me I owe it all to you. I've not been entirely irrelevant, you know.

Leo – Of course...

Clara – I'm perfectly aware that the day will come when I'm no longer fashionable, but for the moment, I want to make the most of this success and take on new challenges.

Leo – Taking on new challenges... You sound like a football striker angling for a transfer... And what challenges exactly?

Clara – It's true I've achieved almost everything in France. But I still think I've got more to prove internationally.

Leo – And you think it's with one of my former students that you'll manage that?

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

Leo – Whereas I'm already an old fool, useless to you, holding you back from becoming an international star...

Clara – I never said that.

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

Clara – I'm doing too many concerts, Leo. Just for the fees. I no longer have time to work. To experiment. To think about what I really want to do with my career while I still have the support of the press and the public.

Leo – Those fees are what paid for this house. This life. Up till now you've never complained... Do you want to go back to busking in the underground?

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

Leo – You're joking, I suppose...?

Clara – I want time to explore other repertoires, meet new people, try new collaborations... And yes, why not play the greatest concert halls in the world.

Leo – Ah yes, a far cry from the starving artist's life... And I thought you were an artist completely detached from material concerns...

Clara – I still have dreams, Leo. I still have ambitions. Is that a crime?

Leo – No...

Clara – I need to live things I haven't lived yet. To feel alive, that's all...

Leo – With Stanislas, then.

Clara – It's not just that, and you know it. I'm tired, that's all. Or rather I'm weary. Weary of always playing the same pieces, in the same halls, to the same people...

Leo – With the same partner...

Clara – We've slipped into a kind of routine, Leo. A pleasant routine, yes, but a routine nonetheless.

Leo – And since you met Stan, life with me has become so dull...

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

Leo – Black holes?

Clara – Apparently, when you approach a black hole, time begins to slow down.

Leo – Really?

Clara – Well, for a while now I've felt as if time, for me, is passing more and more slowly...

Leo – And to think I believed I was your guiding star... So in your eyes I've become a black hole... Very encouraging... And what do you propose? I mean... for us. If there still is an *us*, of course...

Clara – I want to slow down, Leo. To take back control of my life, and my career. To do fewer concerts, but more prestigious ones.

Leo – Yes, but we've got commitments, you know. For the next three years... And when you've made commitments, you have to honour them.

Clara – Commitments...? The ones you made on my behalf, you mean...

Leo – Forgive me... I thought the role of an impresario was to find engagements and sign contracts.

Clara – Without even consulting me?

Leo – So you want to change your impresario?

Clara – Why not?

Leo – It's thanks to me you broke through, Clara. Thanks to my contacts.

Clara – But it's thanks to me that you're still working. I don't owe you anything, Leo.

Leo – And all this just to tell me you've got a lover. Younger. More fun. More fashionable.

Clara – And why not? Do you think no other man could possibly be interested in me?

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

Clara – He's just a good friend.

Leo – I suppose that's a euphemism...

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

Leo – That's the best you can come up with to change the subject?

Clara – But I'm sure I locked the door...

Leo – You're right, we'll resume this conversation at a more suitable time. For now, we've got a gala to perform at, and we still need to pick up your violin.

Clara – Yes, at this rate I won't even have time to warm up before the concert.

Leo – A Stradivarius is like a Formula 1, you don't just jump behind the wheel straight out of your little runabout and head off to the 24 Hours of Le Mans.

Clara – The 24 Hours of Le Mans, a Formula 1 race?

Leo – It was a figure of speech... Have you really decided to ruin my evening?

Clara – I'm sorry...

Leo – But you're right, the 24 Hours of Le Mans is an endurance race.

Clara – Like marriage...

Leo looks at his watch.

Leo – If we leave now, it's still possible. We'll take the Jag... Why don't you go and get dressed?

She moves towards the screen to get changed.

Scene 2

Suddenly, a young man and a young woman, both wearing balaclavas, burst into the middle of the living room. The woman is holding a pistol and points it at them.

Cindy – On your knees, hands in the air!

Stunned, Leo and Clara obey.

Clara – But what on earth is going on? What do you want?

The two intruders don't even bother to reply. On their guard, they quickly scan the room.

Leo – It's a home-invasion, Clara, can't you see...

Clara – It's a joke, right...?

Kevin – Shut the fuck up! Your phones! On the table!

Leo and Clara place their mobiles on the coffee table. Kevin scoops them up and shoves them into his pocket.

Cindy (to Kevin) – Go check if there's anyone else in the house...

Kevin leaves.

Leo – There's no one else, it's just us. We were about to go out...

Clara – Can I at least go and get dressed?

Cindy – Shut up, I said!

Leo – All right, let's all calm down and talk this through, all right?

Clara – Why don't you start by telling us what you want...?

Leo – Money? I should warn you, we don't keep much cash at home. Just a few notes I've got in my pocket...

Clara – And I don't have any valuable jewellery either. No one's ever even thought of giving me any...

Cindy points her weapon at her.

Cindy – Shut your fucking mouth!

Kevin comes back.

Kevin – Didn't see anyone. Apart from a black cat. Scared the shit out of me... It looked like a panther...

Cindy – A panther...?

Kevin – A little panther... I don't know, I've never seen a panther.

Clara – That's Bagheera. You're right to be wary. She can be dangerous with people she doesn't know...

Leo – She once bit a tax inspector. So imagine what she might do to burglars...

Clara – If I were you, I'd leave right now.

Cindy – For fuck's sake, don't you want to stuff something in her mouth...?

Kevin – Stuff something in her mouth...?

Cindy – A gag, for fuck's sake! She's really starting to get on my nerves...

Clara – I'm not sure what rhetorical device that is... What do you think, Leo?

Leo – But how do you expect us to give you what you want if you don't even tell us?

Clara – And when you do tell us what you want, how do you expect us to answer if you gag us...

Kevin looks at his phone screen.

Leo – Apparently they're waiting for instructions...

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

Cindy – Fine, sit down...

Leo and Clara sit. Kevin types on his phone.

Cindy – Well?

Kevin – OK, it's on...

Kevin and Cindy once again look around the room, as if searching for something.

Leo – We don't have a safe, if that's what you're looking for.

Clara – But whatever we've got, we're ready to give it to you.

Leo – Are you art lovers? (*Pointing to the painting*) That's by a young Venezuelan artist. Give it thirty or forty years and it'll be worth something...

Clara – I never liked that painting. Honestly, you'd be doing me a favour if you took it away.

Leo – As long as you leave right after...

Clara – We've got a concert in two hours. We should already be on our way...

Leo – We're just musicians, you know. Not some new crypto billionaires...

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

Cindy – Don't waste your breath, it's not your cash we've come for.

Leo – Oh really...? Then what do you want?

Kevin – The violin. Where is it?

Clara – The violin? My violin?

Leo – You've come to steal a violin?

Clara – But my violin only has sentimental value! On eBay you wouldn't even get more than a thousand euros for it.

Leo – Twelve hundred perhaps, if you said it belonged to the famous violinist Clara Mariani.

Clara – You'd be better off robbing the corner shop, I'm sure there's more money in the till.

Cindy points her gun at Leo again.

Cindy – The violin, for fuck's sake! You, go and get it!

Clara – But what do you want with my violin?

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

Clara – If that's all it is, I'll sign one of my CDs for you and we'll call it quits. What are your names?

Leo – How about two tickets for our concert tonight? But I warn you, there's a dress code. You'll at least have to take your balaclavas off...

The two intruders don't even reply.

Cindy – Did you see a violin when you checked out the house?

Kevin – I saw a piano... A big black grand piano. The cat was sleeping on it. As it was black too, I hadn't noticed it. When I got closer, it started roaring...

Cindy – Roaring? A cat?

Leo – It's the cat that guards my piano. If you want to steal the piano, you'll have to face Bagheera.

Clara – And above all you'll need movers.

Leo – No offence, but you don't exactly look built for the job.

Clara – It's a grand piano...

Leo – Right, and now...?

Kevin checks his phone screen, clearly waiting for instructions.

Leo – Or perhaps they've decided to form a duo, like us.

Clara – A comic duo, then...

Leo – They're short a violin; they can't afford to buy one, so they've come to rob yours.

Clara – I do my good deeds too, you know... If music is such a passion for you, I'm willing to give you a student violin... And if you're that keen, I could even give you a few lessons. Free, of course...

Leo – Don't be ridiculous, Clara... I don't think these youngsters are here for the love of music.

Cindy – So we're too dumb to play an instrument, is that it?

Clara – Not at all!

Kevin – I play a bit of guitar, actually. Cindy and I have a band.

Cindy – Go on then, don't hold back, give them my name... Want to give them my address too...?

Kevin – I only said it like that... (*to the others*) It's just a stage name...

Clara – Don't worry, we heard nothing...

Leo – Come on, lower your weapon, and let's have a civil conversation.

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

Kevin (*about his balaclava*) – For fuck's sake, I can't breathe in this thing...

Leo – Because, frankly, when it comes to big-time crime...

Clara – Your act doesn't seem to be fully worked out yet.

Leo – Yes... if you persist down this road, you'll be the ones to face the music.

Kevin's phone rings.

Kevin – Yeah...?

He steps into the next room to answer. The woman keeps them covered with the gun.

Clara – Can I take this chance to get dressed?

Cindy – Don't you move or I'll knock you...

Clara – It's just behind the screen!

Cindy hesitates for a moment.

Cindy – OK, go on then...

Clara changes behind the screen. Kevin returns. He takes off his balaclava to answer the phone and forgets to put it back on.

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

Kevin – Oh shit... I was too hot. I forgot to put it back on...

Cindy takes hers off too.

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

Clara steps out from behind the screen. She's wearing a stunning evening gown that shows her off to great effect. Kevin stands open-mouthed, stunned.

Cindy – You all right, Kevin?

Kevin – What...?

Cindy – You're drooling...

Clara – I told you, I've got a concert tonight...

Kevin – Yeah, but now they've seen our faces, we'll have to off them both...

Cindy – Especially since you gave them my first name as well.

Kevin – And you gave them mine, mind you...

Leo and Clara wonder whether they're being serious or not.

Leo – You're not going to commit murder over a violin!

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

Kevin – It's the Stratovarius.

Clara – The what?

Leo – That's what you call a portmanteau. I think he's mashed up Stratocaster and Stradivarius!

Clara – Stratocaster...? What's that?

Leo – Honestly, Clara... It's the Stradivarius of electric guitars!

Clara – You've come for the Stradivarius?

Leo (*incredulous*) – So you *do* know what a Stradivarius is...?

Cindy – We know it's worth a packet, that's all that matters.

Clara – But it isn't ours, that instrument! Do you really think we could afford a Stradivarius?

Leo – And anyway, it's not here.

Kevin – Oh yeah?

Clara – It's at our benefactor's, the one who lent it to us!

Cindy – We know that.

Kevin – And we also know you were supposed to pick it up at three to rehearse before the concert.

Cindy – It's six o'clock. The violin must be there.

Kevin – You hand it over nice and easy, we walk out with it, and everything goes smoothly...

Leo – You lot are well informed, it seems.

Clara – Except for one detail. The violin isn't here.

Kevin – I'm warning you, don't mess us around.

Clara – But we're telling you...

Leo – Drop it, Clara... OK, we'll give you the Stradivarius.

Clara looks surprised. Kevin's phone rings.

Kevin – Yeah...?

He goes out to answer.

Cindy – You two, don't move, alright?

Kevin comes back a moment later.

Kevin – Can you come here for a second?

Cindy – I'm watching you from over there; if one of you gets up, I'll take you down.

She goes out with Kevin.

Leo – They've never actually seen a Stradivarius. You might as well hand them your violin, they wouldn't spot the difference...

Clara – What?

Leo – If we want them to go, we've got to give them something.

Clara – My violin?

Leo – It's not a Stradivarius! You said yourself it's got no market value...

Clara – Yes, but it's sentimental — my father gave it to me for my first concert.

Leo – We're not going to die over a mere violin!

Clara – It's a present from my father, I tell you! It's a matter of principle...

Leo – Principle? Come on, Clara, be reasonable! This isn't like handing someone over to the Gestapo to save our skins! We're not going to take a bullet because you haven't resolved your Oedipus complex with your father!

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

Cindy (to Clara) – OK, we've wasted enough time. Now you give us your bloody Stradivarius or I'll shoot him!

Clara hesitates for a moment.

Leo – Clara...?

Clara – OK, I'll fetch it...

She exits.

Kevin – See, you know, in the end she cares more about you than about her bloody violin.

Leo – I've counted: you two, since you arrived, you've said “fuck” about ten times. I suppose for you it's a kind of punctuation.

Cindy – Shut your mouth!

Leo – Ah, you say that a lot too... Doesn't exactly make conversation easier, if I may say so...

Clara returns with her violin and hands it to Kevin.

Clara – There, happy now?

Leo – Now you can go, can't you? I promise we won't give your description to the police. Besides, I've no memory for faces.

Clara – Same here. You know, in our line of work you meet so many people. If we had to remember everyone...

Leo – Last time I bumped into my mother at a funeral. I didn't even recognise her. And yet, it was hers...

Cindy inspects the violin.

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

Kevin examines the violin.

Kevin – There's nothing written on it...

Leo – No, indeed, Stradivarii are never signed. Anyone will tell you that...

Cindy – So how do you recognise them?

Clara – Authenticating a real Stradivarius is an expert's job. You have to examine the wood, the varnish, the instrument's design...

Leo – The shape of the f-holes, notably.

Kevin – The what...?

Clara – The f-holes are the openings on the front of the instrument. They let the violin breathe, like the gills of a fish.

Leo – Depending on the shape of the f-holes, the sound takes on a different colour.

Kevin – Because sounds have a colour now...?

Clara – It's called synaesthesia... Baudelaire, you know? *The Flowers of Evil*...

Leo – “Vast as night and as light, perfumes, colours and sounds answer one another”...

Cindy – And that's worth millions, is it?

Kevin – Doesn't even sound new...

Clara – Stradivarii are priceless. There are fewer than seven hundred left in the world.

Leo – And they're generally not for sale. That's part of what makes them so valuable...

Kevin – We'll check that...

Kevin snaps a photo of the violin with his phone and sends it.

Cindy – If you tried to screw us, shit's gonna go down.

They wait for a reply. A moment of tension.

Leo – I deduce your backer is an expert...

Kevin's face freezes as the reply appears on his phone screen.

Kevin – They're taking the piss, it's not a Stradivarius... It's just a bloody violin.

Cindy points her gun at them again.

Cindy – I told you!

Leo – OK, it's not the Stradivarius!

Kevin – Then go get it right now, asshole, or I'll blow your brains out!

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

Leo – It's true, we were supposed to pick it up at three, but our plans changed.

Cindy – You're lying again!

Clara – I swear I'm not.

Kevin – If it's not here, then where is it?

Clara – I'll repeat: it's with the benefactor who's loaned it to us for a charity gala.

Leo – We were running very late. We were about to go get it and dash straight to the concert.

Cindy turns to Kevin.

Cindy – Search the house.

Kevin goes out.

Clara – You won't find anything.

Leo – You'd better leave straight away. People are going to start worrying if we don't turn up. The police could show up any minute.

Clara – I'm sure our phones are ringing off the hook.

Cindy – Shut your fucking mouths, I don't need your advice. You're still trying to play games with us.

Leo – Who do you work for, anyway? I suppose it wasn't your idea to steal a Stradivarius...

Cindy – You think we're too stupid for that?

Leo – I'm not sure... You know the famous line by Michel Audiard: "Bloody fools dare anything — that's how you spot them."

Clara – Did you know two clowns even kidnapped Charlie Chaplin two months after his death, to demand a ransom from his family?

Kevin returns.

Kevin – There isn't another violin here.

Leo – 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 – We might as well take off, then... forget it...

But Cindy doesn't seem ready to leave.

Cindy – So where exactly is that bloody violin, then?

Clara – Where exactly? It's in a safe at the home of the billionaire who lent it to us. But believe me, you don't get into a place like that as easily as you get into ours. There are CCTV cameras everywhere. Security guards...

Kevin – And you were supposed to pick it up before going to the concert?

Leo – Yes.

Cindy *(to Kevin)* – Well, he can go fetch it, then!

Kevin – You reckon?

Cindy – What are they saying?

Kevin looks at his phone screen.

Kevin – Still no reply... They mustn't know what to do, same as us...

Cindy – We'll have to improvise.

Kevin – We off them and leg it.

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

Cindy – He'll go fetch it, and she'll stay here.

Leo – But they're expecting both of us! If Clara isn't with me, they'll never give me the violin!

Kevin – You've got the big mouth. You'll think of something to fool them.

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

Kevin – Otherwise, I'm warning you: if you come back with the police, we'll kill her.

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

Leo – OK... All right...

Clara – Are you sure...?

Leo – We have no choice, do we...?

Kevin – Well then, go on, for fuck's sake!

Leo exits.

Cindy – Right... What shall we do while we wait?

Clara – Want me to put some music on?

Cindy – I'll sort that...

Kevin – Anything to drink here?

Blackout.

Act 2

Scene 1

Lights come up gradually. Punk-style music, fading out. Clara sits on a chair. Kevin and Cindy pass a bottle of whisky between them, each drinking from the neck in turn.

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

Clara – Oh, really...? That's nice...

Kevin – We're called The Rebels.

Cindy – And now you've gone and told them our band name.

Kevin – Nobody knows us anyway...

Clara – What instruments do you play?

Kevin – Guitar.

Cindy – Drums...

Kevin – With that money we could buy some proper instruments...

Cindy – Not a Stradivarius, but...

Kevin – A Stratocaster.

Clara – I see... So that piece you just played me, that was you...

Cindy – So? What do you think?

Clara – Oh yes, it's... And you recorded that with your band?

Kevin – Yeah... And Cindy sings...

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

Clara – Yes... If I've got it right, you're more Kalashnikov than Rachmaninov...

Kevin – Packs a punch, doesn't it?

Clara – I'm not sure I caught that — was it in B-flat minor or D-flat major...?

Kevin – So you don't like it then...

Clara – No, no, it's... It's very energetic... Very refreshing... It's... It's a change from Chopin or Debussy, that's for sure... It's closer to... serialism, perhaps? In the repetitive sense, I mean... You know Schoenberg?

Cindy – What time is it now?

Kevin – Half past seven.

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

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

Kevin – Love's a beautiful thing...

Cindy – So he can't live without you, is that it?

Clara – Yes... And above all... I'm his breadwinner.

Kevin – What?

Clara – Sometimes I feel like a performing monkey, trotted out at fairs for money.

Cindy – Kind of like a prostitute, then... So he's your pimp, is he?

Clara – He's my manager... But it's true it's a bit the same...

Kevin – In that case, he'll come back...

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

A pause.

Clara – Mind you... we were mid-argument when you turned up.

Cindy – Oh yeah? About what?

Clara – He suspects I have a lover...

Kevin – And...?

Clara – And what?

Kevin – Do you have a lover?

Clara – That's really none of your business!

Kevin – Makes me wonder if we did the right thing letting him off like that...

Cindy – You're about to find out how much he cares for you.

Kevin's phone rings. He answers.

Kevin – Yes...? No, we ran into a snag...

He goes out to finish his call.

Clara – So it is a job, then, isn't it?

Cindy – Shut your mouth...

Clara – We can even talk, can we?

Cindy – You're going to tell me you want to help us, are you?

Clara – Why not?

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

Clara – That concert I'm doing tonight, it's for a charity gala, you know...

Cindy – Oh really...? They say charity begins at home. So we decided to help ourselves, see... rather than hold out our hands in the underground.

Clara – Before I became famous, I used to play for coins in the underground too... There's no shame in begging. But at least I offered something in return. My music. What I can't stand are the poor who only ever hold out their hands. We all have something to give others. Even if it's just a smile. A few lines of a song. Even out of tune...

Cindy – You think I'm out of tune?

Clara – Not at all! *(A pause)* Well... maybe a little, you have to admit. But singing in tune can be learned, you know. Like anything else...

Cindy – And you, you want to sing us a lullaby?

Clara – I could play one of the pieces I'm due to perform at the gala tonight...

Cindy – Like that fiddler who charmed the rats and led them to drown in the river...?

Clara – It was actually a piper.

Cindy – We don't believe your lies any more. All your pretty speeches, they're to lull people like us while you lead them to the slaughterhouse.

Clara – You're not entirely wrong. Imposing bourgeois culture on the masses can be a form of demagoguery. Encouraging kids from the suburbs into classical music deprives them of the right to invent their own culture. After all, jazz was born from the songs of the slaves who worked the plantations, wasn't it?

Cindy seems stunned by what Clara has just said, but Kevin returns.

Cindy – Well?

Kevin – They say we should give up on it...

Clara – That's what I told you.

Cindy – Now it's too late to back out.

Kevin – How long has he been gone?

Cindy – About an hour, give or take...

Kevin – That's worrying... How long are we going to wait like this?

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 a quarter of an hour, we'll decide what to do...

Clara – How much are you expecting from this multi-million heist? A few thousand euros? And you're the ones taking all the risks.

Kevin – You want me to shut her up?

Cindy doesn't answer.

Clara – A violin like that is traceable, you know... You can't sell it on a flea market. The backer will be found eventually, and you'll be the ones footing the bill... Armed robbery, do you know what that can cost you...?

Cindy – We've got no other choice. We weren't born with a silver spoon in our mouths.

Clara – I was born in the suburbs.

Kevin – Even the suburbs have their posh neighbourhoods.

Clara – Your backer doesn't seem pleased with this improvisation. If things go wrong and people die, he'll try to wash his hands of it, saying he only ordered a burglary, not a kidnapping.

Kevin – She'll never shut up, will she?

Clara – And if one day they catch him, he'll have the best lawyer. You'll get a legal aid solicitor... You'll be the ones who pay. Who's behind all this?

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

Kevin – We only have a phone number.

Clara – You're victims too. You're being manipulated... Your names are Kevin and Cindy, aren't they?

Cindy – Yeah, what do you expect. Some people are called Kevin or Cindy from birth, and others are called Leo and Clara. They don't start out with the same chances.

Kevin (*ironically*) – You're a star, apparently, from what we've been told. We could be your warm-up act...

Clara – Why not...? In any case, I could introduce you to my producer. He also does modern music, you know... He might put in a word for you with someone who specialises in that.

Cindy – Right, you'll turn us into stars, just like that...

Kevin – Cut the fairy tales. We need money, now.

Clara – I told you, I can give you more than your backer.

Cindy – Don't bullshit us. We're not naïve.

Kevin – You do charity galas, but you don't give a damn about the poor.

Clara – I'm not as rich as you imagine.

Cindy – It's that you've lost touch with what it really means to be poor. Have you seen the place you live in?

Clara – You're probably right...

Kevin – As soon as we're out of here, you'll run to the cops and give our description.

Clara – I won't even need to. You haven't even got gloves on. You've left your fingerprints everywhere.

Cindy – We'll wipe all that before we go. And as for reporting us, well...

Kevin – We could still kill you.

Clara – You're not going to kill someone for a few thousand euros. Your backer'll wash his hands of it if anyone dies.

Cindy and Kevin look uncertain.

Kevin – It's true he doesn't give a damn about us either. She's right. He'll line his pockets and if anyone ends up inside, it'll be us.

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

Clara – Shall I put some music on? This time I'll choose...

They don't answer. She plays some music. The three of them listen.

Cindy – Is that you?

Clara – Yes... A recording with Leo at the Salle Pleyel. With the Stradivarius, actually...

Cindy and Kevin look impressed.

Kevin – I'm loving it, aren't you?

Cindy – Yeah...

Clara – Sadly, it may be the last time that legendary instrument ever rings out in a concert hall...

Cindy – Are you trying to make us feel sorry for you again?

Clara – Whoever you hand it to will never take it out of his house. The violin would be identified straight away and the thief caught, and you along with him.

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

Cindy – Don't listen to her, I'm telling you... She's even better at blowing smoke than playing the violin.

Scene 2

Leo returns with a violin case. Clara stops the music.

Kevin – Took you long enough...

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

Cindy takes the violin case.

Cindy – I hope for your sakes this time it's the right one...

She opens the case. Clara leans over the violin.

Clara – Yes, it's definitely the Stradivarius...

Kevin – We'll check anyway.

Kevin takes the violin out of its case.

Clara – Be careful how you handle it. It's a unique and very fragile.

Kevin photographs the violin with his phone and sends the picture. Cindy now takes the violin in her hands.

Cindy – How can something like this be worth millions? It is not even new...

Clara – They are absolutely exceptional instruments. Very few remain, and it's extremely rare for one to come onto the market.

Kevin – But how much do they actually sell for?

Clara – In the last decade, several have gone for between ten and twenty million.

Leo – They do get stolen sometimes, too. But sooner or later they're always found.

Kevin picks up the Stradivarius and scratches the strings like a guitar. Horrible sounds come out.

Kevin – Sounds rubbish, doesn't it?

Leo is furious.

Leo – This violin is over three hundred years old! Only the greatest virtuosi have the privilege of playing it. It deserves your respect, you bunch of idiots!

A tense moment. Kevin again points his gun at Leo. But a reply arrives on Kevin's phone; he reads the message.

Kevin – This time, it really is the Stradivarius.

Cindy – Right, then we're off.

Kevin – And what do we do with them?

Cindy hesitates.

Cindy – Can I take your word you won't give our description to the police?

Clara – I'll say you had balaclavas on.

Kevin – And the fingerprints?

Cindy – We're not on any database anyway.

Leo – Not yet...

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

Leo looks a little surprised.

Clara – He'll do 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 – Anyway, you don't care. That violin isn't yours. The insurance will pay.

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 idiot!

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

Cindy inspects the violin.

Cindy – Still, watch it. If the violin's damaged, we won't get paid.

Kevin puts the pistol on the table. They check the violin for damage. Taking advantage of the confusion, Leo grabs the gun and points it at the robbers.

Leo – Hands in the air!

Cindy and Kevin comply.

Kevin – Careful now. Do you even know how to use a gun...?

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

Leo – Why not? It wouldn't be a great loss for humanity! Nobody would complain, believe me.

Clara – We'll plead self-defence.

Leo – We'll even look like heroes...

Kevin – Yeah... But you lot, devout Catholics, maybe even lefties...

Clara – Watch out for Catholics. The Crusades and the Inquisition were their doing.

Leo – As for lefties? That's Stalin and Pol Pot, don't forget.

Cindy – Anyway, they're blanks.

Clara – Oh really?

Cindy – We weren't going to risk killing someone for a bloody violin!

Leo – Blanks, are they? Then why did you put your hands up when I pointed a gun at you?

Kevin – I don't know... Reflex...

Leo – You're lying.

Kevin looks uncomfortable.

Cindy – They're blanks, aren't they?

Kevin – Yeah, well... I think so...

Cindy – You think?

Clara – They're lying.

Leo – How are we supposed to know?

Cindy – You could always shoot.

Kevin steps forward. A shot goes off. He is hit.

Leo – Christ, sorry. The gun just went off...

Cindy – They weren't blanks?

Kevin – The guy who sold them to me only had three blanks, the rest were live rounds. I can't remember the order I loaded them...

Clara – We have to call the police.

Cindy – Don't you dare!

Clara – Or at least get an ambulance.

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

Leo – He's wounded, he needs treatment... If he dies, it'll be on me...

Clara examines the wound.

Clara – It's not so serious. The bullet only grazed him. It's just a scratch...

Leo – Yeah, but it was still an armed robbery...

Clara – Turning these two idiots over to the police... That's not like us, Leo. Not like me, anyway. They'll be sent straight to prison.

Leo – But that's where they belong, Clara! In prison!

He takes out his phone.

Clara – If you call the police, it's over, between you and me.

Leo hesitates, then lowers his phone.

Leo – Fine... as you wish...

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

Leo – You're being rather optimistic...

Clara – It's their first robbery — we'll give them a chance to go straight.

Cindy – OK...

Clara – And thank you, you know...?

Kevin – Thank you, ma'am...

Leo – You'd be better off doing fringe theatre. I'm sure you've got potential.

Clara – And tell your backer never to take such risks again for a mere violin. Even if it is a Stradivarius...

Cindy and Kevin prepare to leave.

Leo – Hang on a minute...

Kevin – What?

Leo – Our mobile phones!

Kevin hands the phones back.

Kevin – Can I take back the gun? A mate lent it to me...

Leo keeps the gun.

Leo – Go before I change my mind...

Kevin and Cindy leave.

Scene 3

Clara and Leo stand, momentarily paralysed.

Clara – Are they really gone?

Leo – I think so...

Clara – I feel as if I'm waking up from a nightmare. Did all that actually happen?

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

Clara – In any case, it's over.

Leo – We could still call the police...

Clara – We've got a concert in an hour... If we call the police we'll have to wait here for them. The house will be combed through. We'll have to give a statement... And we'll have to cancel the gala.

Leo – The hall must already be full.

Clara – Yes... We'd have to refund the tickets...

Leo – Who is this charity gala for?

Clara – Orphans with rare illnesses, or something like that...

Leo – Orphans? Are you sure?

Clara – That's what I understood.

Leo hesitates.

Leo – We were just robbed. In our own home!

Clara – But the danger's passed now.

Leo – You sound like you're talking about a passing storm. This was an armed attack, Clara! We could have died!

Clara – Yes. But we're safe and sound. The violin is intact. And I gave my word.

Leo – Your word? To those two brainless kids!

Clara – You say it yourself, they're totally reckless.

Leo – That seems a good reason to put them out of harm's way, doesn't it?

Clara – Forgive them: they don't know what they're doing... That's what Jesus said about those who were about to crucify him. We're here in our evening dress, about to go to a social event...

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

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

Leo – Admittedly, they're irresponsible. But their backer?

Clara – They don't even know who it is! It must be a collector who took every precaution so he can't be traced.

Leo – What if they try again?

Clara – I think they've got the message. I don't think they'll come back. *(A pause)*
And anyway we still have the gun...

He looks at the pistol he's still holding.

Leo – True, the gun... What do we do with it?

Clara – We could keep it, just in case.

Leo – You can't be serious.

Clara – You're right, we'll throw it in the river.

Leo – Usually it isn't the victims who dispose of the murder weapon. I feel like we're the guilty ones...

Clara – Yes...

Leo – So what do we do?

Clara – I don't know...

Leo – We could keep it.

Clara – The gun?

Leo – The Stradivarius. We tell the police the two idiots left with it... Without giving a precise description. No one will be harmed...

Clara – Except the insurer...

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

Clara – And what would we do with it?

Leo – We'd sell it!

Clara – To whom? They'd find us immediately.

Leo – So we'll keep it. It'll be our secret. You can play it just for me... I don't know why, but I'm already turned on by the idea... Or maybe it's the adrenaline... You know, Eros and Thanatos...

She looks at him, stunned. Her phone rings and she answers.

Clara – Yes...? Good evening... Of course... Yes, yes, everything's fine... Don't worry, we're on our way... There's a bit of traffic, but we'll be there just in time... That's right... See you soon...

She hangs up.

Leo – Already on our way?

Clara – I'll grab my bag. Let's go.

Leo – Where to?

Clara – To give our concert!

Leo – As if nothing happened?

Clara – I assure you, if we call the police it'll only bring us complications. We'll have to explain ourselves... They might even suspect you.

Leo – Suspected? Me? Of what?

Clara – Of having set the whole thing up yourself. After all, you were the one who went to fetch the violin, not me...

She is about to leave.

Leo – And if it was Stan...?

Clara – Stan?

Leo – The backer.

Clara – You're mad...

Leo – He knew our schedule. He knows the house. He knows the difference between your fiddle and a Stradivarius. And he could probably find a collector to sell it to.

Clara – You're rambling, Leo... Is this jealousy?

Leo – Wait... What if you were his accomplice?

Clara – What?

Leo – That would explain why you don't want the police called.

Clara – You're completely crazy...

Leo – You were supposed to start fresh with that money. Then those idiots screwed it up and you're covering for them.

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

Leo – Nor do they know Stanislas. That's how these things work — the backer stays hidden; it's the pawns who go down.

Clara – You've read too many crime novels...

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

Clara – So what — will you turn us in?

He points the gun at her.

Leo – Or maybe I should just kill you now... I could always pin it on those two clumsy fools. No one would dispute my story. I'm the victim, after all.

Clara – Be careful with that thing. It might go off again...

Leo – My lawyer will plead involuntary manslaughter. At worst, a crime of passion. Judges tend to be lenient in those cases...

He still points the gun at her.

Clara – Didn't they say they were blanks?

Leo – Not all of them, apparently...

A moment of hesitation.

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

He lowers his gun.

Leo – You think?

Clara – It puts a lot of things into perspective, doesn't it?

Leo examines the violin.

Leo – It's true, a violin that costs that much is obscene.

Clara – Absolutely...

Leo – And you were the one complaining about routine...

Clara – Yes...

Leo – I heard what you told me earlier, you know... We'll make a fresh start, I promise you.

Clara – All right... But we really must go now.

Leo – OK... Curtain up, let the music begin...

We hear a violin piece.

Clara – Don't forget to take the Stradivarius.

He takes the violin.

Leo – By the way, you still haven't answered me...

Clara – What?

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

They look each other straight in the eye.

Blackout.

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

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
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
Of Vegetables and Books
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

Backstage Bits
Don't panic !
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 – October 2025
ISBN: 978-2-38602-377-4
<https://comediatheque.net/>
Play available for free download