



La Comédiathèque

CHEATERS

A comedy by
Jean-Pierre Martinez

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Cheaters

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Since the publication of his first novel, winner of the Goncourt Prize, Alexandre has enjoyed the reputation and the rewards of a successful author. He is expected at the Ministry of Culture to receive the insignia of Knight of Arts and Letters. Then a stranger turns up, and the whole edifice of his success may be about to collapse...

Characters

Alexandre

Frédérique

Sacha

The character of Sacha may be played by a man or a woman.

Cast: 1 man / 2 women or 2 men / 1 woman.

In this version, Sacha is treated as a woman.

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Scene 1

Alex is sitting at his desk, working on his speech. Frédérique enters, elegant and impeccably well-bred.

Fred – You're ready already?

Alex – From which I gather that you aren't yet...

Fred – We've got plenty of time, haven't we? It's in two hours.

Alex – Of course. And I can still refuse...

Fred – Turning down the Nobel Prize in Literature can be rather distinguished. There are precedents. Jean-Paul Sartre, Bob Dylan...

Alex – I think Dylan accepted in the end.

Fred – But the insignia of Knight of Arts and Letters... I don't know anyone who's ever turned that down.

Alex – You're right, it would be ridiculous. I'll wait until they offer me the Nobel, and decide then.

Fred – Have you prepared a speech?

Alex – It's here. I was learning it. Don't worry, it won't be very long. I hate speeches...

Fred – I'll test you on it in the car...

Alex – What would I do without you?

Fred – The same thing, I imagine.

Alex – But it would be much less fun... (*Frédérique looks around the room.*) Have you lost something?

Fred – Have you seen my mobile?

Alex – No... Do you want me to ring you?

Fred – I'll keep looking a little longer. I need to believe I can still find my mobile all by myself.

Alex – By asking me whether I've seen it...

Fred – I hope you start your speech by thanking your wife.

Alex – I put the thanks at the end, actually, but if you'd rather I started with them...

Fred – I'll take a few copies of the Goncourt novel, just in case.

Alex – Ah, that Goncourt Prize... Sometimes I wonder whether it wasn't a curse.

Fred – Why do you say that?

Alex – I haven't written anything since.

Fred – You hadn't written much before, either.

Alex – Thank you for reminding me.

Fred – It'll come back. You just need to find a subject.

Alex – Yes...

Fred – Besides, some writers only produce one masterpiece in their lifetime. Alain-Fournier, for example. Apart from *Le Grand Meaulnes*...

Alex – Yes, but he died at the front in 1914, a year after writing his bestseller. That rather explains why he didn't write another one...

Fred – Everyone knows it can take a few years to recover from winning the Goncourt.

Alex – Some novelists never recover. I sometimes wonder whether I'd have been better off staying a teacher. And carrying on self-publishing my work.

Fred – Oh, come on... Can you see yourself teaching literature in a suburban secondary school to forty illiterates in hooded tracksuits?

Alex – Let's not exaggerate. École Normale, agrégation... I'd never have crossed the Paris ring road. I'd have taught in a Catholic school to twenty daddy's girls in plaid skirts, ready to do anything for good marks without opening a book...

Fred – Right... Put like that, I understand your regrets a little better. Remind me to put parental controls on the television. I get the feeling that when I'm not here, you watch some very peculiar films.

Alex – It's true that, as a novelist, most of my fans are closer to the menopause than to puberty.

She goes over to him and gives him an affectionate caress.

Fred – Don't forget your first fan was me.

Alex – I remember very well.

They kiss. She pulls away from his embrace.

Fred – Come on, you need to finish your speech... But if you miss it that much, I promise I'll get my kilt out from time to time.

Alex – By the way, before I forget, Maxence just rang.

Fred – Oh yes...

Alex – He suggests we spend Christmas with them at his chalet in Megève. We could organise a book signing while we're there. Apparently there's a very good bookshop in Megève, and it does extremely well.

Fred – Really?

Alex – It's a curious phenomenon. Those posh women from the 16th arrondissement don't open a book all year, and the moment they go on holiday they rush to the local bookshop to buy every literary-prize winner in sight.

Fred – Those posh women, as you call them, are your readers. In any case, they're the ones who buy your books...

Alex – Must be the mountain air. And people get so bored on skiing holidays.

Fred – Especially when they don't ski, like you.

Alex – I invited him and Diane to dinner here next week. Why not Wednesday?

Fred – Wednesday we're having dinner with my parents.

Alex – Oh yes, sorry... It's usually Tuesday...

Fred – Yes, but this time it's Mum's birthday. Have you forgotten already?

Alex – Let's say it had slipped my mind... Thursday, then?

Fred – Thursday is the opening of Carla's exhibition at the Galerie Claude Bernard!

Alex – Sorry. I'd forgotten that too.

Fred – If you ever leave me, remember to replace me with an inflatable doll and an electronic diary.

Alex – Maybe we should cut down on the social whirl a bit, don't you think? We're getting terribly bourgeois.

Fred – You say that, but after a week you'd be bored stiff... Right, I'm going to finish getting ready.

Frédérique exits. Alexandre returns to his speech.

Alex – Madam Minister, several years ago, when the Académie Goncourt honoured my novel *Another Life*, it recognised in me a humble servant of the language of Molière. Today you are making me a knight. Yet it is rather as Don Quixote that I receive this distinguished honour. For a young author who wants to live the dream of writing — and quite simply to make a living from writing — the first enemies he must fight are windmills...

Frédérique comes back in.

Fred – Sorry to interrupt you, but... there's a woman at the gate. She says she's come a very long way to get you to sign her copy of your book. And that she's been waiting a very long time for this.

Alex – This really isn't the time... And what kind of person just turns up and rings our bell without warning? Where did she get our address, anyway? We're not in the phone book. The social register, perhaps...

Fred – I don't know, but she's insisting. It'll take five minutes. Better get rid of her now, otherwise she'll come back. What can you do? It's the price of fame! After all, it's your fans who pay our bills...

Alex – All right. I'll sign her book.

Fred – I told her you didn't have much time.

Alex – Do I say "Madam Minister" or simply "Minister"?

Fred – No idea...

Alex – Life was so much simpler when there weren't any women ministers.

Fred – I'll show her in...

Frédérique exits.

Scene 2

Alexandre sighs, sits down again and looks over the text of his speech, crossing things out.

Alex – Don Quixote... I wonder if I'm laying it on a bit thick...

Sacha enters.

Sacha – I imagined you younger...

Alex – Sorry, I didn't see you come in.

Sacha – So this is what the inside of a successful author looks like...

Alex – I'm sorry. Another time I'd have offered you coffee and we could have had a chat, but I'm in rather a hurry...

Sacha – Ah yes... The Knight of Arts and Letters medal... You wouldn't want to miss that...

Alex – You know about it?

Sacha – Your wife told me... I assume she's your wife... Or your assistant... Perhaps both...

Alex – Right... So you know I don't have much time to spare...

Sacha – Don't worry, I won't keep you long.

She sits down and makes herself comfortable, contradicting her own words. He is slightly taken aback.

Alex (*ironically*) – Please, do sit down. I believe you wanted an autograph...

Sacha – An autograph, yes... (*She picks up a copy of the Goncourt-winning novel from the desk and looks at the cover.*) *Another Life*: the tragic fate of a woman who decides to disappear and change her identity after a devastating love affair. You could say this book changed my life.

Alex – Thank you.

Sacha – I didn't say it changed it for the better...

Alex – I'm sorry to hear that...

Sacha – It changed yours too, of course.

Alex – Mine?

Sacha – This book changed your life as well. And in your case, mostly for the better...

Alex – That's true...

Sacha – A Goncourt is no small thing...

Alex – Indeed.

Sacha – You’d written nothing of any real significance before it. You’ve written nothing at all since...

Alex – Very kind of you to remind me.

Sacha – On the other hand, you’re extremely good at selling yourself in the media. Newspaper articles, television appearances, lectures abroad... Bravo. What energy!

Alex – Promotion is part of the job... Even if it isn’t my favourite part.

Sacha – You’d rather be writing, I imagine. Unfortunately, you’ve only ever put your name to one bestseller.

Alex – I did write two other novels before this one.

Sacha – Yes... But they have nothing like the same power, if you don’t mind my saying so. You could almost believe they weren’t written by the same author.

Alex – They were youthful works. I matured.

Sacha – In any case, after that unexpected Goncourt, you certainly knew how to make your little capital of celebrity grow. It helps that your wife’s family gives you no shortage of contacts in the press and in politics. Daddy-in-law is an ambassador, I believe...

Alex – You seem remarkably well informed after all... As I told you, I’m in a hurry. Did you bring a copy for me to sign?

Sacha – What would be the point? There are plenty here, aren’t there?

Alex – I see... Since I was told you’d come a long way, I’ll sign one for you and then I’ll have to ask you to leave. (*He takes a copy from a pile.*) What name shall I put?

Sacha – Sacha.

Alex – How do you spell it?

Sacha takes a copy, writes a dedication in it and hands it to Alexandre.

Sacha – Like that.

Alexandre takes the book, unsettled.

Alex (*reading the dedication*) – “To my greatest fan”... Usually I’m the one who writes dedications to my readers, and I’m the one who signs them... Not the other way round...

Sacha – Signing things is certainly something you’re good at...

Alex – Look, my dear lady...

Sacha – Sacha.

Alex – Look, Sacha, you turn up at my home without warning. I’m courteous enough to grant you an audience when I’m in a hurry. But if you’ve come here to insult me... And who are you, anyway?

Sacha – The voice of your conscience, perhaps. Assuming you have one...

Alex – What exactly are you getting at?

Sacha – We both know perfectly well that all this is a lie, don't we?

Alex – All what?

Sacha – You didn't write this novel. You found the manuscript on a train.

Alex (*thrown*) – Don't tell me that's why you... (*Recovering himself.*) That is indeed what the preface says. But from Cervantes to Boris Vian, many writers have used that literary device. It's part of the fiction. It isn't real.

Sacha – You and I both know that in this case it happens to be the literal truth. I must say, I take my hat off to you. Passing off a manuscript you didn't write as your own, and having the nerve to say so in the preface because you were convinced everyone would take it for a literary device...

Alex – That's completely ridiculous! How can you make such an accusation?

Sacha – Because I wrote that manuscript.

Frédérique enters.

Fred – Darling, we really have to go now... Unless we want to keep the minister waiting...

Alex – Yes, yes, just another minute.

Sacha – Don't worry, madam. I wouldn't dream of depriving your husband of another richly deserved honour.

Frédérique exits.

Alex – What on earth are you talking about?

Sacha – The truth, and you know it better than anyone.

Alex – If what you're saying were true, why wouldn't you have come to see me before now?

Sacha – Let's call it... a Goncourt of convenience.

Alex – I don't have time for puns, and I'm not in the mood. I want you to leave now.

Sacha – If I leave here, I'm going straight to the offices of the country's biggest morning newspaper. You know the one — the paper you sometimes write editorials for. I'm sure they'd be very interested in my story.

He hesitates for a moment.

Alex – All right. I'm listening.

Sacha – After losing the manuscript I'd spent years working on, I went through a very bad patch.

Alex – And of course you hadn't made a copy.

Sacha – It was a long time ago. I wrote the old-fashioned way. Loose sheets of paper. Fountain pen. In fact I was on my way to Paris to make photocopies and send them to publishers.

Alex – If you really wrote the novel, you could have written it again.

Sacha – You're a writer too. A bad one, but a writer all the same...

Alex – Thank you...

Sacha – You know perfectly well it isn't that simple. When you've worked on a book for years, crossed out and rewritten every paragraph for months, spent a week turning one sentence every possible way... you don't have the energy to start again from scratch after losing the manuscript. Especially when you don't even know whether the publishers you send it to will bother reading a single line.

Alex – So you admit it isn't so easy to get a novel published with any real chance of being read.

Sacha – When I found myself cut off from my own work, I was in shock for months. Then I sank into a deep depression. I even tried to kill myself...

Alex – Unsuccessfully, obviously...

Sacha – Unfortunately for you... Then I decided to do what the woman at the end of my novel does: disappear. Deliberately. But I had no money. And I couldn't do anything except write. Instead of starting a new life, I drifted across France. Across the world. I became a vagrant. I might never have discovered the plagiarism at all, because you took the precaution of changing the title of my novel.

Alex – So how did you find out?

Sacha – Completely by chance. I picked up the book in a library.

Alex – You have no proof of any of this...

Sacha – It wouldn't be hard to find some. The manuscript was largely autobiographical. I scattered personal references throughout the novel, and you didn't bother disguising them. Everything in there is true. It's my life. Your heroine is me...

Alex – I see...

Sacha – Everyone congratulated you on portraying that wounded woman so realistically, trying to invent another life for herself. Erasing your memory and starting again sounds simple. But bodies always have a way of floating back to the surface.

Alex – I'm truly sorry...

Sacha – Sorry?

Alex – I had no way of finding the author. Besides, how does anyone lose the manuscript of a novel?

Sacha – I was attacked. Violently. Someone stole my bag. I fought back. My whole life was in there. All my dreams of redemption. They knocked me unconscious. I nearly died...

Alex – And then?

Sacha – I woke up in a hospital bed. The thieves must have taken what interested them and dumped the manuscript in another carriage or on a station platform. To them, it was worthless...

Alex – Quite.

Sacha – Which is where you found it, I assume...

Alex – Let's say I did.

Sacha – Unless it was an ambush designed to rob me of my work. An ambush arranged by you, perhaps?

Alex – Now you're raving!

Sacha – The thought crossed my mind. But it was probably just an ordinary mugging. They must have been disappointed. I barely had enough money on me for the photocopies.

Alex – How could I possibly have found you? Your name wasn't even on the manuscript.

Sacha – True. But you weren't obliged to appropriate my work either.

Alex – I waited two years before publishing the novel.

Sacha – Long enough to claim you'd written it... and to make sure the real author hadn't kept a copy.

Alex – I thought it would be a shame to deprive the public of that novel. I had no idea it would win the Goncourt.

Sacha – You did everything you could to make it happen. You don't win the Goncourt by accident.

Alex – After that, it was too late. I got caught in the machinery. And as you yourself said, you were the one who had decided to disappear!

Sacha – You didn't know that.

Alex – Did you look for me back then?

Sacha – In any case, I've found you now.

Alex – Would you have come to see me if the novel hadn't won the Goncourt?

Sacha – Probably not.

Alex – Without me, that manuscript might never have been published at all. As for winning a literary prize...

Sacha – So I ought to thank you.

Alex – And what do we do now?

Sacha – I don't know. What do you think?

Alex – What exactly do you want? Do you expect me to give you back the life you might have had before you decided to change it? That life is behind you.

Sacha – Thank you.

Alex – That's how it is. Some people are lucky and others aren't. But destiny isn't decided by one throw of the dice.

Sacha – So I was born to have a shit life, and you were born to be successful?

Alex – What do you want? Revenge?

Sacha – I don't know what I want yet. I'm going to take some time to think about it.

Alex – I'm prepared to compensate you, of course. Provided we can come to an agreement.

Sacha – For now, all I'm asking for is your hospitality.

Alex – Is that a joke?

Sacha – I've only just come back to France. I have nowhere to go. I need somewhere to stay while I think about my future. You must have a spare room...

Frédérique comes back in.

Fred – Everything all right?

Alex – Yes, yes. I'll explain...

Sacha – We were talking about literature.

Fred – Shall we go?

Sacha – I'll leave you to it. But I promise I'll be back to continue this fascinating conversation...

Frédérique gives Alexandre an anxious look.

Blackout.

Scene 3

Frédérique comes back in. The landline rings. She answers.

Fred – Yes, Mum... Yes, yes, we've only just got back... Yes, it went very well. The minister's speech was very moving. Thank Dad for me. It's thanks to him we got her. They were at Sciences Po together, I think... The ENA, that's right... Yes, I'll pass on your congratulations to Alexandre. He's parking the car. Listen, we'll tell you all about it on Wednesday, all right? Yes, I know you'd have liked to be there, but never mind. You can come next time... Next time? I don't know... Yes, exactly, for his Legion of Honour! *(She gives a slightly forced laugh.)* All right, lots of love.

Alex comes in just as she hangs up.

Alex – Who was that?

Fred – Mum.

Alex – Oh, right...

Fred – Why? Were you expecting a call?

Alex – No, no...

Fred – Can I see it?

Alex – See who? I mean, what...?

Fred – Your medal!

Alex – Shit. I think I left it in the car.

Fred – Well... You certainly seem attached to it. Aren't you pleased?

Alex – Yes, yes, of course...

Fred – Don't treat me like an idiot. I can see something's been bothering you ever since earlier.

Alex – Nothing at all, I promise.

Fred – Ever since that woman came, to be precise.

Alex – What are you imagining now...?

Fred – Who is she? Your mistress?

Alex – Frédérique, honestly. Did you look at her?

Fred – All right, she isn't exactly sexy. But she isn't ugly enough to frighten you. And I saw the fear in your eyes earlier.

Alex – Can we talk about all this tomorrow? My head isn't very clear. I think I overdid the champagne.

Fred – I only saw you drink one glass...

Alex – Then it must be that caviar sitting badly on my stomach. It didn't seem very fresh... I'm beginning to wonder if it was lumpfish roe. Do you think a government ministry would actually serve lumpfish roe? Budget cuts can go too far, don't you think?

Fred – I'm not waiting until tomorrow, Alexandre. If you've got something to tell me, tell me now.

A pause while he hesitates.

Alex – All right, you're right. There's no point delaying it. Unfortunately, I have to face the consequences of what I've done. It was bound to happen sooner or later...

Fred – Now you're frightening me. Well?

Alex – It isn't easy...

Fred – Is she your mistress?

Alex – It would be easier if she were my mistress.

Fred – So she isn't.

Alex – More like... a mistress who blackmails.

Fred – What could she possibly blackmail you about? The only vaguely criminal matter in your past is being taken into police custody for desecrating a grave.

Alex – That's true.

Fred – They let you go when they realised you were completely drunk and it was your own father's grave.

Alex – I only pissed on it. A stupid bet with myself.

Fred – So that isn't what she's blackmailing you about.

Alex – No, unfortunately.

Fred – Then what?

Another silence.

Alex – What if I told you my whole life was built on a lie?

Fred – A lie...?

Alex – Worse. A fraud. An intellectual fraud.

Fred – I'm listening...

Alex – You said it again earlier. I'd written before, yes, but everyone agrees that this Goncourt is the work of my life.

Fred – And...?

Alex – What if I didn't write that book...? (*She does not even look surprised.*) Aren't you going to say anything...?

Fred – I'm thinking.

Alex – Thinking? I tell you you're married to a plagiarist, and you're thinking?

Another silence.

Fred – I always thought that book couldn't have been written by you.

Alex – Well, I can confirm it. I didn't write it.

Fred – Yes, I understood.

Alex – That's all the effect it has on you?

Fred – We decided together to publish that book. We promoted it together. It's a bit like our baby. The child we could never have together.

Alex – Well, I'm telling you the baby isn't mine...

Fred – I know.

Alex – And how do you know? Just because you don't think I'm capable of writing a masterpiece like that?

Fred – I saw the manuscript. It wasn't in your handwriting.

Alex – Why didn't you say anything?

Fred – We couldn't have lived together with that lie between us.

Alex – So you preferred us to live the same lie separately...

Fred – It's worked perfectly well until now, hasn't it? And it could have gone on working perfectly well.

Alex – Unfortunately, that woman has turned up at our door. From now on, nothing can ever be the same.

Fred – That depends.

Alex – On what?

Fred – You can always come to some arrangement.

Alex – Yes... We'll also have to come to some little arrangement with our conscience.

Fred – We settled that a long time ago, didn't we?

Alex – What else do you know? Apart from the fact that this baby isn't mine...

Fred – I don't know who the father is, if that's what you're asking. But since that woman came, I think I know who the mother is.

A pause.

Alex – How could you let me do this?

Fred – Love, quite simply. And ambition too, a little, I admit. You wanted this life so badly. The life of a writer. You got to live it...

Alex – But I’m nothing but an impostor. And our whole life is a lie. You knew. You should have stopped me.

Fred – Don’t start reversing the roles...

Alex – You’re right. I’m the bastard. Are you going to leave me?

Fred – If I was going to leave you, I’d have done it back then. We don’t have a choice any more. We’re in the same boat.

Alex – And the boat is sinking.

Fred – No rash moves. And above all, no panic. We need to think. What are you planning to do?

Alex – I don’t know... Suicide would probably be the best option. At least it would be literary...

Fred – Don’t be ridiculous. You haven’t got the courage to kill yourself.

Alex – You really do have a very high opinion of me. I wonder how you’ve managed to stay married to me all these years. How you’ve managed to go on loving me...

Fred – It’s us as a couple that I love. Our complicity. We’re partners in crime, Alexandre. I’m not going to let you down. And I’m not going to let that woman destroy us.

Alex – In this case, I’m the one who destroyed her life...

Fred – On the other hand, that manuscript only got published because you already had a certain reputation.

Alex – And above all because of my in-laws’ connections...

Fred – That woman would probably never have become successful, even if she did write a masterpiece.

Alex – Yes, that’s what I started telling her... But I’m afraid it may not be enough...

Fred – Without this particular chain of circumstances, you wouldn’t have become so famous, but she would probably have remained unknown. Everyone knows you don’t win the Goncourt by posting an unsolicited manuscript to Gallimard. Social reproduction counts for a lot. You need connections.

Alex – You’re right. Genius isn’t enough. Otherwise Van Gogh would have become a billionaire. His paintings did eventually sell, yes — after his death. And the only people who got rich were speculators.

Fred – Exactly. It’s unfair, but that’s how it works. Money goes to money, and success to success. The art market decides what an artist is worth, not talent. Otherwise museums of contemporary art wouldn’t exhibit all that rubbish. Literature is exactly the same.

Alex – I was afraid my wife would disown me after I confessed this unforgivable moral crime. I’m almost disappointed.

Fred – Don’t start lecturing me on morality as well!

Alex – We're monsters, Frédérique. I'd be better off confessing everything now...

Fred – Absolutely not. I have everything to lose in this scandal too! Starting with my honour!

Alex – Your honour?

Fred – My reputation, if you prefer. Not to mention my parents'... I gave up everything to manage your career! Can you imagine the scandal if the press found out? Mum would never get over it... Her heart is weak as it is.

Alex – Yes, but we can't go on pretending nothing's happened. That bitch isn't going to leave us alone.

Fred – Is she blackmailing you?

Alex – Not yet. So far she's only asked whether we could put her up here.

Fred – Put her up?

Alex – Temporarily, I imagine. She says she has nowhere to go...

Fred – And what did you tell her?

Alex – I didn't really have a choice. (*The doorbell rings.*) That must be her...

They exchange an anxious look.

Fred – I'll let her in.

Blackout.

Scene 4

The room is empty. Sacha comes in wearing underwear or pyjamas, clearly just awake. She goes out again and returns with a cup of coffee. She sits at the desk and strikes a pose. Alexandre enters. He is unpleasantly surprised to find her there, installed in his place.

Alex – Don't mind me... Make yourself at home.

Sacha – If you bought this house with the proceeds of your Goncourt, then in a way I am at home...

Alex – It's a family house. It came from my in-laws.

Sacha – I've always dreamed of having a study like this... Is that fountain pen a Montblanc?

Alex – I think you overestimate how much a Goncourt actually earns you, apart from glory.

Sacha – Really?

Alex – Don't imagine that one literary prize would have been enough to admit you to the privileged classes. The entrance fee is rather higher than that, believe me.

Sacha – And therefore permanently beyond my means.

Alex – Success isn't just about talent, you know.

Sacha – Clearly. You're a successful author and you don't have any.

Alex – Succeeding in this profession takes a great deal of effort, patience, skill... and a great many compromises. You have to swallow a lot of things you don't like.

Sacha – I'm sure you're very good at that.

Alex – Writing is an art, of course. But it isn't the hardest part. At least, it isn't the most unpleasant. In a way, I envy you...

Sacha – Take my place! I'll take yours...

Alex – It isn't that simple.

Sacha – Really?

Alex – Why don't we make a deal?

Sacha – You keep the honours and give me the money?

Alex – I was thinking of sharing the royalties. Confidentially, of course.

Sacha – Of course.

Alex – I'd go as far as fifty-fifty.

Sacha – All these years, you've been enjoying the fruits of my work. Not to mention the fame. How exactly do you intend to put that injustice right?

Alex – We could agree on a lump sum for the past, obviously. Plus a percentage of future royalties. What do you think?

Sacha – I'd have to think about it...

Alex – I built a reputation, day after day. Year after year. While you had disappeared. Deliberately. Off on your little solo tour of the world...

Sacha – So it's almost dishonest of me to come and ask you for anything now.

Alex – I wouldn't go that far. But you could benefit from what I've built too, rather than destroying it all now.

Sacha – What do I get out of it?

Alex – Money! While staying in the shadows, obviously.

Sacha – Well, well.

Alex – My publisher keeps pressuring me to write another novel. We could work together. I'm proposing a win-win arrangement. Your talent, my reputation. We split the royalties.

Sacha – After stealing my work, you're offering me a job as your ghostwriter? I have to admire your nerve.

Alex – Think about it. A plagiarism lawsuit would drag on for years. I'd have the best lawyers. And the outcome would still be uncertain. We'd both lose a great deal of time. And if I've understood correctly, you've already lost quite enough of that.

Sacha – Your cynicism is impressive. But I'm not entirely unmoved by your arguments.

Alex – I'll leave you to think about it.

Alexandre exits.

Scene 5

Sacha gets up and looks around the property. Frédérique enters.

Fred – Everything all right? Have you got everything you need?

Sacha – To be honest, I'm a little hungry. Haven't you got something I could dunk in my coffee?

Fred (*ironically*) – Would you like me to go out and get you some croissants?

Sacha – Oh, please, don't put yourself out. Not if the maid has taken the day off...

Fred – I think there are some speculoos biscuits in the kitchen cupboard.

Sacha – Speculoos? That is tempting. I'll have a look later...

Fred – I hate them, but my husband loves them.

Sacha – When there's nothing else around to dunk your biscuit in.

Fred – Are you planning to stay here long?

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

Fred – On what?

Sacha – On your husband, for one thing. We have some business to settle. He's offered to employ me as his ghostwriter. Didn't he mention it?

Fred – Don't take me for a fool. My husband has no secrets from me. He told me everything.

Sacha – I'm sorry for you. I truly sympathise.

Fred – Do you?

Sacha – You thought you were married to a great novelist. Now you discover you're only the wife of a common plagiarist...

Fred – What do you want?

Sacha – You should have married me instead...

Fred – Don't tell me that's what you want...? But if it is, you should know I'm prepared to do anything for the man I love. I can't promise you marriage, obviously, but if mature women are your thing...

Sacha bursts out laughing.

Sacha – You certainly don't lack nerve either!

Fred – I'll take that as a compliment.

Sacha goes over to Frédérique and puts a hand on her cheek.

Sacha – Do you find me attractive? (*Frédérique looks unsettled for a moment, then regains her composure.*) After all, I'm the genius, and you married him for his genius!

Fred – Not only for that.

Sacha – And I could write more books...

Fred – Then why haven't you already?

Sacha – I haven't said my last word.

Fred – According to Alexandre, that first novel was your own story. Perhaps you simply have nothing else to tell.

Sacha – Novelists always tell a little of their own lives, don't they?

Fred – Yes... Which is why, as time goes on, they have fewer and fewer interesting things to say. I'm not sure employing you as a ghostwriter would be such a good deal for us...

Sacha – I could always tell your story. It sounds fascinating...

Fred – The lives of some crooks are more exciting than those of most honest people. Especially when the crooks have a victim complex like yours...

Sacha – So you're the real artist here.

Fred – As far as your literary fertility is concerned, you seem to have reached the menopause some time ago.

Sacha – Your husband is sterile. He couldn't even manage to give you a child.

Fred – Stay out of our love story. You wouldn't understand it.

Alexandre enters and hears the end of the conversation.

Alex – Were you talking about me?

Fred – I'll leave you to it...

Fred exits.

Scene 6

Alex – Don't push this too far, I'm warning you.

Sacha – Or what?

Alex – I know you don't think very highly of me, but don't underestimate me.

Sacha – I'm trying not to... I admit it isn't easy... I'll make an effort, I promise.

Alex – I made you an offer.

Sacha – And I'm considering it, I assure you... (*A pause.*) Do you still have it?

Alex – Have what?

Sacha – The manuscript!

Alex – No...

Sacha – You destroyed it, didn't you? To get rid of the evidence of your crime?

Alex – Why? Do you want it back?

Sacha – You'll understand that the manuscript has sentimental value for me.

Alex – And you'll understand that if I still had it, I wouldn't hand it over without something in return.

Sacha – So you don't have it any more.

Alex – Let's say... I misplaced it.

Sacha – That's so stupid I'm almost inclined to believe you.

Alex – And do I have to believe you?

Sacha – About what?

Alex – What if you were bluffing?

Sacha – Then I'd already have won. You immediately agreed to show me your hand.

Alex – I could still refuse to pay.

Sacha – You played and you lost. Gambling debts are sacred. And you know what happens to people who refuse to pay them.

Alex – We know nothing about you.

Sacha – I told you. The novel is autobiographical.

Alex – But that was years ago. You're no longer the character in that novel. And I'm not quite the man who signed it any more.

Sacha – I know you well enough to know you won't take the risk.

Alex – What risk?

Sacha – You'll pay. To buy yourself some peace. The only people you have the courage to answer to are your insurers. All you care about is insuring your cosy little life, with a little medal every now and then to reward all the good marks you got by cheating.

Alex – So it is money you want.

Sacha – That would reassure you, wouldn't it?

Alex – What else could you possibly want?

Sacha – Do you know what it feels like to have your work taken away from you? To see your own words, written in your own blood, signed by somebody else's hand?

Alex – No...

Sacha – It must be a little like what a woman feels when her baby is taken from her at birth and handed to a stranger.

Alex – I never wanted that. That manuscript was a foundling. How do I know you didn't abandon it?

Sacha – Deliberately, you mean?

Alex – A message in a bottle, perhaps. Hoping somebody would find it... Your saviour... And do the publicity for you...

Sacha – If I understand correctly, you almost deserve another medal for answering my SOS.

Alex – I didn't steal that manuscript from you.

Sacha – True. I don't think you'd have had the courage for robbery with violence. Your speciality is more opportunistic theft, isn't it?

Alex – You're right. I'm a coward. But I'm not a criminal. I've paid for sex in my time, but I've never raped anyone.

Sacha – I think I'll go and get dressed after all...

Sacha exits.

Scene 7

Frédérique comes back in.

Alex – I can't stand seeing her here every day, in the middle of our living room. Sprawled all over our sofa. When she isn't actually sitting at my desk...

Fred – Yes, but in a way it's better to have her where we can see her.

Alex – You think so?

Fred – At least we know she isn't in confession somewhere, pouring out her story to the first priest she can find.

Alex – Or completely drunk in the local bar, telling the barman all her troubles.

Fred – Yes, that would be more her style... Not to mention the risk of her selling her scoop to a tabloid or a television channel.

Silence.

Alex – You told me you'd seen the manuscript.

Fred – Yes.

A pause.

Alex – Do you know what happened to it?

Fred – To what?

Alex – The manuscript! One day it was in the locked drawer of my desk. The next day it had gone.

Fred – Had the drawer been forced?

Alex – No, and you're the only person who could know where I hide the key.

Silence.

Fred – All right. I took it.

Alex – I rather suspected you had...

Fred – So in fact we both knew.

Alex – I can just about understand why you chose to say nothing when you knew I wasn't the real author of the novel. But why did you take the manuscript?

Fred – Life insurance, I suppose...

Alex – Insurance against what?

Fred – In case success went to your head and you decided to leave me for someone younger.

Alex – So you still have it?

Fred – Yes...

Alex – I'm discovering a whole new side to you, Frédérique.

Fred – You thought I was an idiot, is that it?

Alex – I thought I was pulling the strings in this sordid little comedy. It turns out I was only a puppet.

Fred – But you're the one in the spotlight, darling...

Alex – And I'm the one who could end up behind bars.

Fred – You'd sell your soul for a good line. That's your problem.

Alex – So imagine what I was prepared to do for an entire novel...

Silence.

Fred – We could get rid of it...

Alex – The manuscript?

Fred – Its author.

Alex – You're mad!

Fred – If she disappeared, nobody would worry... She arranged her own disappearance. She's already officially missing!

Alex – You are joking, I hope?

Fred – Of course I'm joking... So what do you suggest?

Alex – Negotiate. We don't have a choice. But I'm still not sure money will be enough for her.

Fred – It will. Money can buy anything. It all depends on the amount...

Alex – How high can we go?

Fred – What price do you put on your reputation?

Alex – Thank you for not saying my honour...

Blackout.

Scene 8

Sacha is stretched out on the sofa, dozing. She could almost be dead. Frédérique enters holding a knife. She approaches Sacha and seems to hesitate.

Sacha – Killing someone isn't as easy as you might think, you know. Especially with a knife.

Fred – I only wanted to cut myself a slice of sausage. Would you like some?

Sacha (*sitting up*) – No, thank you. I'm a vegetarian.

Fred – I should have guessed.

Sacha – Really? Why?

Fred – I don't know... That tendency you have to side automatically with the victims, perhaps. The ones destined for the slaughterhouse. Are you religious?

Sacha – I believe in reincarnation. The wheel turns. And in the end, we'll all have played every role.

Fred – I see... And next time the first shall be last... Exactly what I was saying. Replace reincarnation with resurrection and, when you think about it, that view of the world is rather Catholic.

Sacha – Even in this life, we're our own executioners, don't you think? We're victims of our own demons.

Fred – If the wheel keeps turning, I suppose you'll end up plagiarising yourself...

Sacha – Who knows...? Your husband and I may simply be two sides of the same medal. The Knight of Arts and Letters medal.

Fred – I'll always prefer the knight to the man of letters... I'll kill you.

Sacha – And by murdering me, you'll be murdering yourself.

Fred – You really do think you're Jesus Christ.

Sacha – You're the one wearing a cross around your neck...

Fred – I wear it like a banner.

Sacha – Yes. A class banner. All you ever fight for is to preserve your privileges.

Fred – I don't turn the other cheek. My religion is a conquering one. The religion of the Crusades. I don't wallow in the role of victim the way you do.

Sacha – You prefer the side of the executioners?

Fred – I prefer the side of the winners. Don't you?

Sacha – I don't want to have to choose. "I am human, and nothing human is alien to me."

Fred – A philosopher as well, are you?

Sacha – Terence. A Latin playwright who lived almost two centuries before Christ.

Fred – Got any more like that?

Sacha – “I am the wound and the knife. I am the blow and the cheek. I am the limbs and the wheel. And the victim and the executioner!”

Fred (*ironically*) – Beautiful...

Sacha – Baudelaire.

Fred – Have you read *The Flowers of Evil*?

Sacha – Have you? Have you actually read it, or do you only know the few quotations you need to shine at dinner parties?

Fred – In any case, I have no sympathy for people who refuse to get blood on their hands during the hunt but come running when it’s time to divide the spoils.

Sacha – Be careful with clichés about vegans. Hitler was a vegetarian too.

Fred – You do sound as if you know what you’re talking about.

Sacha – Hitler?

Fred – Crime. You said it wasn’t easy to kill someone with a knife.

Sacha – The hardest part is getting rid of the body afterwards.

Fred – So you’re speaking from experience...

Sacha – While you were filling your pockets with my royalties, I went through a difficult period...

Fred – I’m terribly sorry...

Sacha – They say necessity knows no law. In reality, it’s necessity that turns people into outlaws. But you’re above all that, of course. In your world, you’re the ones who make the law.

Fred (*ironically*) – I take it you had an unhappy childhood... Would you like to talk about it?

Sacha – It’s curious. Everyone wants me to tell them my life story. Yet it’s already described in considerable detail in my novel.

Fred – We’re the ones who made that novel a success. Without us, you’d have had to self-publish it. By now even you would have forgotten it.

Sacha – Perhaps...

Fred – And honestly, just look at yourself...

Sacha – What?

Fred – Listen to yourself as well. “What?” In our world, as you call it, one says “Pardon?”

Sacha – No kidding?

Fred – You don't have the class of a writer. You'd come across terribly on television. Why not leave that side of things to the professionals? Everyone would win.

Sacha – So you're suggesting we divide up the work? Your husband has no style when he writes, I have no style when I speak. So I write his books and he speaks for me?

Fred – Why not? It's rather like *Cyrano*, isn't it? You do know *Cyrano*?

Sacha – You actually make me want to vomit. How have you lived with this all these years? Lived off it.

Fred – Everyone plagiarises everyone else in literature, you know. They always have. If it were a crime, we'd know about it.

Sacha – It is certainly an offence. Not to mention morally wrong, of course. But you have no morals.

Fred – What do you want? It's time you told us. Money?

Sacha – You've got nothing else to offer me anyway. In the end, you're right. I'm not docile enough to perform the circus act that would be required of me to gain admission to your shitty little world.

Fred – That sounds reasonable. How much?

Sacha – One million.

Fred – The winner of the Goncourt gets a cheque for ten euros.

Sacha – That doesn't include the spin-offs... Hundreds of thousands of copies sold. Television appearances. All-expenses-paid lectures...

Fred – That particular Goncourt didn't sell quite that well.

Sacha – I detect a faint note of reproach in your voice... So the novel I wrote was only just good enough to be signed by your illustrious husband, is that it?

Fred – You'll understand that we'll need a little time to raise the money.

Sacha – I'm in no hurry. I'll give you twenty-four hours.

Fred – And we'll need guarantees. To make sure this is the end of it once and for all.

Sacha – What guarantees?

Fred – A handwritten letter from you, renouncing all rights to the novel in exchange for that sum. You'll also undertake not to bring any legal proceedings.

Sacha – All right.

Fred – I've prepared a draft. All you have to do is copy it out.

Sacha – So now it's my turn to do the copying...

Fred – Sorry?

Sacha – A few years ago, your husband copied out an entire book he hadn't written.

Fred – One million. That's all. Then you disappear from our lives.

Sacha – You can count on me. Disappearing is my speciality. And with a million, it'll be much easier. Give me the paper.

Fred – Here.

Sacha – Excellent. I'll go and do my homework in my room... I'll come back when I'm finished. Am I allowed to watch television afterwards?

Sacha exits.

Scene 9

Alexandre enters.

Alex – My agent just rang. They want to adapt my novel for the theatre...

Fred – That's what you always dreamed of, isn't it?

Alex – Did I really just say *my* novel?

Fred – It may not be your novel, but it is our Goncourt.

Alex – You're right. The success belongs to us.

Fred – Yes.

Alex – I did rewrite a few passages. It wasn't that good to begin with...

Fred – And it was full of spelling mistakes.

Alex – Have you spoken to her?

Fred – Yes.

Alex – And what does she want?

Fred – One million. Full and final settlement.

Alex – That's expensive... Do we have it?

Fred – Yes. In a life-insurance policy. We'll do without the life insurance. We don't have any children anyway.

Alex – So shall I say yes to the stage adaptation?

Fred – Better keep them waiting a little. There's one detail I still want to check...

Alex – All right. I'll ring them back.

He exits. Fred also goes out, then returns with the manuscript.

Blackout.

Scene 10

Sacha leafs through the Goncourt-winning novel. Frédérique enters.

Sacha – It's amazing how much more intelligent a novel looks once it's been printed rather than sitting there as a manuscript.

Fred – Especially when the book is wearing the red band of a literary prize...

Sacha – You were right to change the title. Mine wasn't very good.

Fred – What was it again?

Sacha – *Memoirs of an Amnesiac*. Are you trying to catch me out?

Fred – Do you have the letter I asked for?

Sacha – Here it is.

Sacha hands her the letter.

Fred – Right...

Fred examines it.

Sacha – Something bothering you?

Fred – More of a relief, actually... I had my doubts, but now I'm certain. This handwriting — yours — isn't the handwriting in the manuscript.

Sacha – I thought the manuscript had disappeared?

Fred – I put it somewhere safe.

Sacha – And what conclusion do you draw from this graphological analysis, Inspector?

Fred – You're an impostor too. You didn't write the novel.

Sacha – If you say so...

Fred – I suspected as much. The real author would never have been satisfied with financial compensation.

Sacha – True. I'm not who you think I am.

Fred – Then who are you?

Sacha – It doesn't matter who I am... I met the woman who wrote this book in prison.

Fred – Is she still there?

Sacha – I don't know. She was ill. She may be dead. Maybe not. She told me her life story. Her novel. How she lost the manuscript.

Fred – Did she send you?

Sacha – No. I'm working for myself.

Fred – So you don't know what became of her...

Sacha – She was transferred and I lost track of her. A few years later, by chance, I came across the Goncourt novel in the prison library. I read it. I remembered her story, and I understood.

Fred – Why wait all this time?

Sacha – I was released last week. I came straight here.

Fred – So the real author knows nothing about any of this.

Sacha – That changes nothing for you. I want my money in exchange for my silence.

Fred – It changes everything. You're just a common blackmailer. Not an artist we robbed. You aren't even a writer. And your ten-line letter is full of spelling mistakes.

Sacha – Your husband isn't a real writer either. All three of us are thieves. I only want my share of the loot.

Fred – Yes, but now you don't have any evidence...

Sacha – Wrong. Now I have the original manuscript. And it isn't in your husband's handwriting.

Fred – The manuscript?

Sacha – Do you really take me for an idiot? I saw you coming with that handwritten-letter trick. You're cleverer than your husband, but nowhere near as clever as me.

Fred – How could you possibly have got hold of the manuscript?

Sacha – I wrote that letter knowing you'd go straight to compare the handwriting with the manuscript. It was my way of finding out whether you were hiding it in the house, and where. I kept an eye on you, and I found it.

Fred – You're bluffing again.

Sacha – Go and look in the basement and see whether it's still there.

Fred – I don't believe you.

Sacha – I told you, I've just come out of prison. I know where people hide the most valuable thing in their house...

Fred – You bitch.

Sacha hands her a piece of paper.

Sacha – I've written down my bank details. I want that money in my account by the end of the week.

Fred – Don't worry. You'll get it...

Frédérique exits.

Scene 11

Alexandre enters.

Alex – You're still here?

Sacha – Who knows, I'll soon be rich. I'll be able to live in a smart neighbourhood too. I noticed there's a lovely house for sale directly opposite yours.

Alex – Don't push your luck.

Sacha – Of course, there's another solution... Much simpler, in a way. And much cheaper for you.

Alex – Which is?

She moves towards him seductively.

Sacha – Marry me! We get married under a community-property regime, and I become one of your beneficiaries.

Alex – You're forgetting my wife. I'm not sure she'd agree. And neither would I...

Sacha kisses Alexandre on the mouth. Surprised, he does not push her away.

Sacha – Just relax... *(She becomes even more forward.)* You'll see. I may surprise you...

Alex – You already have... But you're not my type at all.

Sacha – And yet you put your name on my novel. Strange thing to do if you don't like my style...

Alex – I meant your type... Your gender is rather ambiguous as well...

Sacha – Who knows...? You might acquire a taste for it...

Frédérique enters and catches them embracing. Sacha bursts out laughing.

Sacha – Don't worry, I'll leave him to you... For now. I'm going for a walk in the garden. It's terribly stuffy in here. But tomorrow, I want my money.

Sacha exits.

Alex – I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me.

Fred – I was expecting you to say she took you by surprise and forced that kiss on you. So you didn't dislike it?

Alex – Oh, stop it. What are you imagining?

Fred – She is younger than me. And novelty has its attractions.

Alex – I'm not even sure she really is a woman... You've got nothing to worry about.

Fred – Perhaps. But if I were you, I'd be careful. I'd be prepared to kill to keep you.

Blackout.

Scene 12

Frédérique is sitting at the desk. Sacha enters.

Sacha – Do you have my money?

Fred – Here it is.

She hands her a cheque. Sacha takes it and examines it.

Sacha – Ten euros... Is this a joke?

Fred – That's the amount of the cheque given to the winner of the Goncourt Prize.

Sacha – Don't play games with me. I remind you, I've just come out of prison...

Fred – You shouldn't have tried to seduce my husband.

Sacha – What are you going to do? Kill me? Even for a crime of passion, you know, the sentence is far heavier than for simple plagiarism. I know something about that.

Frédérique hands her a sheet of paper.

Fred – Here is half your money. Five hundred thousand euros. That's confirmation of a transfer to the account you gave me. You'll get the other half when you return the manuscript.

Sacha – You'll get it. But first I'll wait until the money is actually in my account.

Sacha takes the transfer confirmation from Frédérique.

Fred – And what guarantees that you won't come back and blackmail us again?

Sacha – You made me sign a written undertaking.

Fred – You know what pieces of paper like that are worth...

Sacha – True, nothing guarantees I won't come back once I've run out of money. How long does it take to spend a million? I'm not used to it, you understand.

Fred – I can't spend the rest of my life with that sword of Damocles hanging over my head.

Sacha – Of course you can. You've got nerve. More than your husband. You're the one who wears the trousers, aren't you? Even if he's the one who wears the medals...

Fred – That arrangement suits me perfectly.

Sacha – In the end, you should have put your name on the book. But he's the one who'll carry on strutting around Parisian salons and appearing on television.

Fred – I prefer pulling the strings. I don't like being in the spotlight.

Sacha – Shame... The light suits your complexion...

Fred – Do you really like women?

Sacha – In prison, you don't have much choice, you know. Sometimes you acquire a taste for it...

Sacha moves closer to Frédérique. Frédérique steps aside without exactly pushing her away.

Fred – We even have a sauna. If you fancy it...

Sacha – Why not?

Fred – It's in the outbuilding at the bottom of the garden. I'll bring you some towels.

Sacha – Thank you... You could join me if you like...

Fred – I'll be there in fifteen minutes.

Sacha – I'll be waiting. We can continue this delightful conversation.

Fred – I'm sure it will be very steamy...

Frédérique exits.

Blackout.

Scene 13

Frédérique enters with her mobile to her ear.

Fred – Yes, exactly... I'm asking you to cancel that transfer. Very good, I'll send confirmation by email. Thank you. Have a good day...

Frédérique puts away her mobile and sips a cup of coffee. Alexandre enters, looking worried.

Fred – What's wrong? You look worried. Are you all right?

Alex – I've just come up from the garden. I wanted my sauna, like every morning after my cardio workout...

Fred – And...?

Alex – You won't believe it, but that dreadful woman was already in there.

Fred – Really?

Alex – In the sauna, completely naked.

Fred – No...

Alex – And, more importantly, completely dead.

Fred – Really?

Alex – You don't look surprised...

Fred – I don't know... She must have had a heart attack. It happens sometimes, you know. If you have a weak heart, saunas aren't recommended.

Alex – Yes, perhaps... Especially since she looked as if she'd been in there all night.

Fred – What a strange idea.

Alex – Her face was scarlet, and she was lying in a pool of sweat.

Fred – How horrible! The notice on the sauna door clearly says not to stay in for more than half an hour.

Alex – Yes... I don't know what possessed her to stay in there so long...

Fred – Who knows...?

Alex – Mind you, the door had been jammed shut from the outside with a metal bar.

Fred – No...

Alex – What have you done, Frédérique?

Fred – I did what you should have done yourself long ago if you had any balls.

Alex – But why?

Fred – She would never have stopped! She'd have blackmailed us for the rest of our lives. Even though, as it turns out, I've just discovered she didn't write the novel either...

Alex – She didn't? Then who did?

Fred – Another woman, apparently. She met her in prison.

Alex – I always knew that girl didn't have the class of a writer. But then why did you kill her if she wasn't the author?

Fred – I was afraid you'd leave me. That you'd run off with her.

Alex – What on earth are you talking about? Can you imagine me with that...?

Fred – I'm joking. But even if she wasn't the author, she knew everything. She could have blackmailed us just the same.

Alex – This is a nightmare... I'm going to turn myself in to the police.

Fred – Words, as usual. You strike a dramatic pose and wait for me to tell you what to do.

Alex – So what do we do?

Fred – We could try to make it look like an accident, but that's risky...

Alex – If anyone asks what our relationship with this woman was, and what she was doing in our sauna...

Fred – Better make the body disappear.

Alex – Right... If you think that's best... And then?

Fred – Then? Nothing. We go back to a normal life.

Alex – A normal life?

Fred – Enough talking. I'll finish my coffee and then we'll go. We've got work to do...

Alex – Even so... It must have been a horrible way to die.

Fred – She asked for it.

Alex – And before that, you joined her naked in the sauna.

Fred – I had to put her at ease...

Alex – So now you know whether she was a man or a woman.

Fred – Yes.

Alex – Well?

Fred – What difference does it make now? Corpses are unisex.

Alex – Does a woman remain feminine after she dies?

Fred – That's good. Is it yours?

Alex – Still not, unfortunately... It's from a Brigitte Fontaine song.

Fred – You're about to get your answer... Come on.

Blackout.

Scene 14

Frédérique and Alexandre enter carrying Sacha's lifeless body. He has her by the feet and she has her by the shoulders. They dump her unceremoniously on the sofa.

Alex – I didn't think she'd be this heavy... Especially after all the water she's already lost...

Fred – You know the expression "dead weight".

Alex – So?

Fred – It proves a dead person always weighs more than a live one.

Alex – As long as she doesn't weigh on our conscience...

Fred – Did you bring the car round?

Alex – It's downstairs.

Fred – Perfect.

Alex – How are we going to get rid of the body?

Fred – We'll take it to our country house in Brittany. We'll cut it into pieces, burn the remains in the wood stove and scatter the ashes from the top of the cliff.

Alex – You frighten me, Frédérique. You sound as though you've been doing this all your life...

Fred – Do as I say and everything will be fine.

Alex – I've always trusted you blindly, but for some reason I've got a bad feeling about this.

Fred – Have you got a better idea?

Alex – No...

Fred – Then let's not waste time.

Alex – All right... Besides, after a night in the sauna, cremation should be easier. She's already lost a lot of water...

Fred – Do you really think this is the time for jokes?

Alex – You're right. I think we have a more immediate problem...

Fred – We could roll her up in the rug.

Alex – What for?

Fred – I don't know. They always do that in films.

Alex – All right...

They prepare to wrap her in the rug.

Fred – I think the rug is too small.

Alex – We'll take her as she is.

Fred – This time I'll take the feet. It'll be lighter for me.

Alex – All right...

They pick up the body again and carry it out.

Blackout.

Scene 15

Alexandre and Frédérique enter looking cheerful.

Alex – That little break in Brittany did us good, didn't it? We look much better.

Fred – Yes... Walking by the ocean. Breathing the fresh air. Rediscovering the taste of authentic things.

Fred – Every time I go back there, I feel as though I'm returning to my roots.

Alex – Brittany? As far back as you've managed to trace your family tree, your family has never moved out of the 16th arrondissement.

Fred – Your roots are wherever you feel at home — and where you can afford to buy a country house.

Alex – It's strange. I feel as though this ordeal has brought us even closer together.

Fred – So do I.

Alex – And now we've got nothing left to hide, I feel more relaxed. Don't you?

Fred – Nothing left to hide? From each other, you mean?

Alex – Of course... We're still having dinner with your parents on Tuesday?

Fred – Yes, as usual.

Alex – Good. It'll be nice to see them.

Fred – It will. We haven't seen them for ages.

Alex – Two weeks, actually.

Fred – Exactly.

Alex (*picking up a newspaper*) – So, how's the world?

Alexandre opens the newspaper and starts leafing through it.

Fred – It's the autumn literary season.

Alex – Sadly, there's no chance of us winning a prize. We haven't got anything to publish...

Fred – Not yet...

Frédérique takes out a manuscript and begins to read it. They read separately for a moment. Then Alexandre notices the manuscript.

Alex – Not that bloody manuscript again?

Fred – This is a different one.

Alex – Another one?

Fred – I found it in the spare room, under a floorboard...

Alex – So she must have hidden it there... It's a miracle... I already found her Bible on a train, and now she's dead she's left us her New Testament as well...

Fred – The two manuscripts are in the same handwriting.

Alex – So perhaps she really was the author after all?

Fred – It's possible...

Alex – That woman was truly diabolical.

Fred – Yes... We were right to get rid of her.

Alex – If we told anyone this story, they'd never believe us.

Fred – Which is why we're not going to tell anyone.

Alex – Except our readers, perhaps. You have to admit, it would make quite a novel, wouldn't it?

Fred – It already has.

Alex – What do you mean?

Fred – That's what this second novel is about.

Alex – I really have no luck. Every good idea has already been used by somebody else. What have I got left apart from plagiarism? (*A pause.*) Is the manuscript any good?

Fred – Even better than the first one...

Alex – My agent keeps pestering me to publish something else.

Fred – Why not put your name on this one? I promise you, it's entirely worthy of you.

Alex – She's dead, after all. Let's say we'll be her beneficiaries...

Fred – You always know how to find exactly the right words, darling. That must be what makes you a successful author. Yes, we're entitled to it. That's how things work. We're the sort of people who are entitled to everything. And that isn't going to change any time soon.

Alex – I wonder how she ended up in prison in the first place...

Fred – To think that when she first came to see us she had no evidence at all. I had the manuscript. If you hadn't confessed everything...

Alex – True. I let myself be trapped. I shouldn't have. But she took me by surprise. I promise that next time...

Fred – Next time?

Alex – These days I'm half expecting the doorbell to ring at any moment and another one of my thousands of readers to turn up accusing me of having found the book on a train.

Fred – Which, after all, is exactly what the preface to your book says.

Alex – We can't kill all of them.

Fred – There'd be nobody left to buy your books.

Alex – What's my new novel called?

Fred – *Cheaters.*

Alex – We may have to change the title before I give the manuscript to my publisher.

Fred – Dear Maxence... By the way, did you confirm Christmas in Megève with them?

Alex – Yes, yes... It's all agreed. The book signing is organised too.

Fred – Perfect. The mountain air will make a nice change. Because honestly, Brittany...

The telephone rings.

Alex – Do you think it's another blackmailer?

Fred – We're about to find out...

Alex – By the way, is there a feminine form of "blackmailer"? A "blackmailress"?

Fred – Answer it!

He answers.

Alex – Hello? Yes... Yes, yes, speaking... Right... Well... Yes, of course, I'm very honoured... Thank you for letting me know... (*He hangs up.*) That was someone from the ministry. They're giving me the Legion of Honour... for my entire body of work.

Fred – Really?

Alex – You don't even seem surprised.

Fred – You can thank Dad. He had a word with the Prime Minister.

Alex – I'm going to have to write another speech.

Fred – It's the price of fame.

Alex – Still... As long as nobody asks me to write any books...

Soft music begins and very slowly grows louder. Sacha returns, sits at the desk and starts making corrections to the manuscript.

Fred – Yes... Life is a lie.

Alex – Do you love me?

Fred – What do you want me to say?

Alex – Yes?

Fred – Then I love you. What about you?

Alex – Yes... (*A pause.*) I love myself.

Fred – That's funny...

Alex – It's Sacha... *(She gives him a puzzled look.)* Sacha Guitry.

Fred – You're right. In future, it's safer to plagiarise writers who are already dead...
It'll save me having to kill them.

They smile at each other while Sacha continues writing.

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 more than 120 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 websites :

<https://jeanpierremartinez.net/en/plays/>

<https://comediatheque.net/traductions/playsinenglish/>

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 French Society of Authors (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](#).

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
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
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
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 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
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

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
Once upon a time on the web
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
Such a Lovely Village
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

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Don't panic !
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
No Sense off Limits
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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