

La Comédiathèque

Casket for two

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English translation
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When two candidates in a local by-election cremate their spouses on election day, conditions are rife for spoiled ballots and stray bullets. Especially when the funeral director's newly hired temp has a mind of her own...

Characters

Edmund
Candice
Francis
Beatrix

PROLOGUE

(Optional)

The reception area of a funeral parlour, identical to the bland, generic reception area of any company. The two female characters in this prologue are played by the same actors playing Candice and Beatrix in the play. They are both in mourning with black veils covering their faces – this will prevent the audience from recognising them later in the play. Care must also be taken to ensure that both characters dress and speak very differently from one another.

The first woman enters the room. She takes a handkerchief out of her bag, wipes a tear and blows her nose. Her mobile rings. She answers with a very posh accent.

Woman 1 – Yes...? Oh, it's you... Yes, yes, I'm at the funeral home now. I hadn't seen him for years but, you know. It's still a shock. I wished to see him one last time...

The second woman enters, also in mourning, also wearing a veil over her face.

Woman 1 – I'm sorry, I'll have to call you back. My sister just arrived. Thanks for calling...

Both women embrace coldly.

Woman 2 – Thanks for letting me know. I didn't receive the death notice. Is he here?

Woman 1 – Yes.

Woman 2 – Have you seen him?

Woman 1 – Yes.

Woman 2 – It's been at least ten years... Has he changed much?

Woman 1 – He's dead.

Woman 2 – Yes... I'm not sure I want to see him, actually. I've never seen a dead person before. Maybe I should preserve the memory I have of him the last time we met. Full of life...

Woman 1 – Come on, dear. Do it for him. I'm sure he would have loved to see you one last time.

Woman 2 – If you say so.

She walks away without enthusiasm and exits stage left.

Her sister is left alone and wipes another tear.

The other woman returns shortly, a little confused.

Woman 1 – Are you ok...?

Woman 2 (*embarrassed*) – Did you say the first door to the right?

Woman 1 – Yes, why?

Woman 2 – It's not him.

Woman 1 – You haven't seen him for ten years. Of course he's changed.

Woman 2 – He hasn't changed gender has he? That's a woman in that casket.

Woman 1 – Are you quite sure...?

Woman 2 – And she looks nothing like him... Didn't you see her?

Woman 1 – I was so upset this morning. I dropped my contacts in the sink. Maybe it's the door to the left. They have two viewing rooms... I'll go check.

Woman 2 – It's best if I go...

She exits stage left, leaving her sister even more distraught, and returns quickly.

Woman 1 – So...?

Woman 2 – It's not him either.

Woman 1 – Are you sure?

Woman 2 – Not unless he managed to hide the fact that he was black... Let me see the obituary, maybe you got the wrong address. There's so many funeral homes.

Woman 1 – Oh my God... It was already so upsetting to learn of his passing, and now we won't even be able to attend his funeral...

She takes the obituary from her handbag and hands it to her sister.

Woman 2 (*glancing at the obituary*) – No, this is the right place, I don't understand... (*reading out loud*) It is with great sadness that the family of... But that's not his name!

Woman 1 – What are you talking about? Let me see...

She takes the obituary that her sister is handing her, squints at it to compensate for the absence of contact lenses.

Woman 1 – Oh, crap! That's the neighbour's name... We get their post about once a month. Ramirez, Martinez... it's an easy mistake to make... I didn't check.

Woman 2 (*dismayed*) – So he's not dead...

The other woman looks at her sheepishly.

Woman 1 – I am so sorry...

Embarrassed silence.

Woman 1 – What do we do with the flowers?

Woman 2 – I don't think we can return them...? Imagine if florists started giving people their money back after funerals... Why don't we leave them here for the grave of your neighbour's deceased.

Woman 1 – Especially since they don't seem to miss him a whole lot... There's no one to see him.

Woman 2 – That's because you received the death notice.

Woman 1 – Oh bugger, of course. How am I going to tell them...?

Woman 2 – Ah, yes... It's going to require diplomatic-grade thoughtfulness and consideration.

Woman 1 – Oh well, silver linings and all that... he's not dead! (*sighing*)... I had already reached the fourth stage of grief...

Woman 2 – Consider it a head start.

They make to leave.

Woman 1 – Oh my God ...

Woman 2 – Are you going to see him?

Woman 1 – Who?

Woman 2 – Him!

Woman 1 – Why would I want to see him?

Woman 2 – I don't know. You were so keen to say your final goodbyes, you could do it while he's still alive...

Black.

Short interlude with funereal music.

ACT 1

The reception area of a funeral parlour, identical to the bland, generic reception area of any company. On the desk, a phone rings. Edmund, the owner, is dressed in a very conservative manner. He walks in, grumbling.

Edmund – Coming, coming... Why is everyone in such a hurry... We haven't even started our sales yet... They'll end up killing me, I tell you... *(He answers the phone with a commercially fake politeness.)* Birdseye Funeral Parlour, how can I help...? Yes, Mr. Mortarfield, we expect it this morning... That's right, oak with gold handles and apple green lining... yes, from this year's fall-winter collection... You know, the Elizabeth 2 is a classic model. Timeless. It's not cheap, that's true, but appearances were important to Mrs Mortarfield. Trust me, this model never disappoints. We've never had any complaints... We'll see you Tuesday then, Mr Mortarfield... It's a pleasure, Mr Mortarfield... I mean, er... Tuesday then... And once again, please accept our most sincere condolences... *(He hangs up.)* I must be getting tired... *(The phone rings again.)* Damn it... Birdseye Funeral Parlour, how can I help...? Oh, it's you Yvonne... Did the doctor come by...? The flu, of course... It's epidemic this winter... Very aggressive strain this year... The phone is ringing off the hook here... Thankfully I should be getting the new collection delivered this morning, so I'll have some stock available, you never know... Oh, I didn't mean for you... I am completely buried. No, it really isn't a good time for you to fall ill... There's too much for me to do on my own... No, the temp isn't here yet. I don't know what's keeping her, she should have been here at 9:00. Not a great start... *(glancing through the display window)* Oh, someone's coming, it's probably her. Got to go. Take care of yourself. Love you too...

Candice enters the stage. She is a young woman dressed extremely inappropriately for the job she is coming to temp for (either sexy or grunge or goth, for example).

Candice – Hi! Sorry I'm late...

Edmund – Indeed... Alarm didn't ring, on your first day?

Candice – Oh no! The alarm rang on time, and I got up and everything. But I fell asleep on the bus. The driver woke me at the end of the line. I had to take the bus all the way back in the other direction... *(her mobile rings)* Sorry... Hey Pam... No I just got to work... for Birdseye! Oh God, you don't want to know... The one time I get up on time and everything... you're not going to believe this, I fell asleep on the bus...

Edmund – Excuse me, we're not done.

Candice – Look, I'll call you back later when it's more quiet, ok? *(She puts her mobile away.)* That was my BFF Pam.

Edmund – And you, what's your name?

Candice – Candice.

Edmund – Candice?

Candice – Is there a problem?

Edmund – No, no... I mean... Candice, it sounds a little... You know what I mean...

Candice – No...

Edmund – Let's say that in our profession we are used to names that are more discreet.

Candice – Like what?

Edmund – I don't know... Like Nicola, Emma... Michelle even... or Carole. My wife is called Carole... Do you really think you can replace her...?

Candice – Replace her...?

Edmund – Do people call you Candice?

Candice – Well d'uh, it's my name.

Edmund – And what's with these shoes...?

Candice – These shoes are made for walking...

Edmund – I'm not so sure... Did they tell you your position would require talking to clients?

Candice – Well yeah... They told me I would be at reception.

Edmund – You need to understand that to work in our establishment, a more... sensible outfit would be more appropriate.

Candice – Oh...

Edmund – Have you had any training? Or previous experience in our industry?

Candice – I have a beautician diploma. And I worked in Tesco's three months ago.

Edmund – Beautician... Yes, that could come in handy. Maybe.

Candice – Really...?

Edmund – Tesco's... Do they have a funeral planning department?

Candice (*surprised*) – No... Fish counter.

Edmund – Well here at Birdseye we don't do discounted products. Whatever next? Online shopping?

Candice – Sure, why not?

Edmund – Tesco's and us, we are not in the same business, understood?

Candice – Understood...

The phone rings.

Edmund – This is a good time to show what you can do... Might as well throw you in the deep end because we sell them as fast as they come in at the moment. I won't

have time to give you any training. You should be able to manage answering the phone, right?

Candice – No problem... *(She picks up the phone with confidence.)* Birdseye Frozen Foods, how can I help...? I'm sorry Madam, but I'm afraid you have the wrong number... No problem, Madam... You're welcome, Madam... Good bye Madam...

Candice, satisfied with her performance, turns towards Edmund who stares at her, petrified.

Candice – What's wrong?

Edmund – Is this a joke? It's a joke, isn't it. Candid Camera. I knew it.

Candice – Huh? It was an old dear in tears who thought she was calling a funeral home...

Edmund – We ARE a funeral home!

Candice *(distraught)* – No...?

Edmund – The temp agency didn't tell you?

Candice – They mentioned cold meat... And since your company is called Birdseye...

Edmund – This is a nightmare... *(Regaining control of his emotions)* Ok, unfortunately I don't have a choice.

Candice – So here, this place, it's... a store for the stiff's? But I've never done that before...

Edmund – Look, all you have to do is answer the phone and take messages. When someone comes in, call me. And most important of all, don't take any initiative. Understood?

Candice – Understood.

Edmund – Right, now I have to go back to work on my local MP...

Candice – The local MP?

Edmund – Lakewell. The by-elections... You haven't seen the posters on the cemetery wall? The polls open today! And since the incumbent MP isn't running...

Candice – The incumbent MP?

Edmund – Yes... And you could say he's hung up his shoes for good. I'm in the process of making him look more presentable over there in the back. And believe you me, that's not an easy task...

Candice looks through the display window towards the posters.

Candice – Mrs Lakewell... On the posters she doesn't look too bad...

Edmund – Not Mrs Lakewell, her husband! He's the incumbent MP. His wife is running to save his seat in Parliament.

Candice – Oh, I see...

Edmund – Mr Lakewell's funeral is later today. But I'm struggling to make him look presentable. His body was submerged in water for a long time, so obviously...

Candice (*horrified*) – Submerged?

Edmund – Actually, if you could take over and handle the finishing touches. Usually it's my wife who takes care of that part but since she's not here...

Candice - Well... I mean...

Edmund – Didn't you just say you had a beautician's diploma?

Candice – Yes, but no...

Edmund – I see... ok... Do you think you can manage the phone?

Candice – Yes, yes of course...

Edmund – In that case I'll leave you to it... Oh, by the way, I'm expecting a delivery this morning. When the goods arrive, let me know immediately please...

Candice – The goods? (*Horrified*) You mean you're expecting stiffs?

Edmund – Miss, take note that we don't call our clients 'stiffs' but 'our dearly departed'.

Candice – Sure...

Edmund – Furthermore, we don't consider their arrival here a 'delivery' but a last visit they make to those who prepare them for their final voyage.

Candice – Okay...

Edmund – Just pretend you're working in a travel agency. Our clients are booking a cruise, so to speak. Except the return ticket isn't included.

Candice – I see... So what's the delivery then?

Edmund – I'm expecting a casket delivery. The new collection. The catalogue is right there beside you!

Edmund leaves. Candice glances at the catalogue.

Candice – Fuck me... A cruise, indeed... (*She calls someone on her mobile*) Pam? You're not going to believe this... Guess where those bastards at the Job Center sent me? I'm an undertaker! The things you do to earn a living, I tell you. Oh, for now it's rather quiet. I'm at reception... (*The phone on the desk starts to ring.*) Sorry, I have to go... (*She picks up the phone.*) Birdseye Foo.. Birdseye Funeral Home, how can I help?... Yes... Yes... (*taking down notes*) The monthly special, absolutely ... the Basic Pine model... 99 Pounds, VAT included... Very well, I'll tell him Mrs Lakewell... You can count on me... Goodbye Mrs Lakewell.

She hangs up and gives a sigh of relief. Relief that is short lived as a man walks in and comes to the desk.

Candice – You're here for the delivery...?

Francis – Er... No... Francis Martino. I have an appointment with Mr Birdseye. To select a model...

Candice (*putting on a salesman smile*) – I'll call him... Please take a look at our catalogue while you are waiting... (*She hands him the catalogue.*) Is it for a gift?

Francis – It's for my wife...

She looks at him while he glances at the catalogue without much interest.

Candice – I knew you didn't look like a delivery man...

Francis – Yes...

Candice – I'm sorry, but... You look familiar, are you famous?

Francis – Yes, my picture is all over town.

Candice – You're wanted by the police?

Francis – Not yet... For now I'm only a candidate in the elections... (*pointing at the posters outside*) That's me on the posters...

Candice – Francis Martino! Mrs Lakewell's opponent!

Francis – Well, the one running against her...

Candice – You're the Tory, right?

Francis – No, that's Mrs Lakewell's party... I'm from the Center party. But you know what they say: the center is everywhere but our constituency is nowhere...

Candice – Wow... I didn't think I'd get to meet celebrities in this job...

Francis – Everyone dies you know. Even celebrities.

Candice – So you lost your spouse too?

Francis – Yes, I did...

Candice – Snap!

Francis – Pardon?

Candice – With a death in the family right before the elections, Mrs Lakewell had an advantage. But this levels the playing field.

Francis – You think?

Candice – If Obama's grandmother hadn't died right before the elections, do you think he would have been the United States' first black president?

Francis – Maybe not...

Candice – And if Hillary had lost something, anything, even her poodle, history would have taken a much different course...

Francis – Maybe...

Candice – Unfortunately for her, not only was she not bereaved in any way but her husband is a womanizer and people don't side with those who get cheated on. It's not fair but what can you do?

Francis – I see you're a fine analyst of political systems... Er... Is Mr Birdseye here?

Candice – Yes, of course, I'll call him right away. *(She glances on her phone and reads the different labels.)* Let's see... cold storage... kitchen area... Thanatopraxy... I don't know what that means but I'll try that... *(she dials the extension and waits until Edmund eventually picks up.)* Bingo! Mr Birdseye? Francis Martino is here for you... *(She hangs up.)* He'll only be a minute.

A slightly uncomfortable silence. Francis flips through the catalogue just to have something to do.

Francis – And what about you, have you made your choice?

Candice – That's not very nice of you Mr Martino. I'm still very young to be choosing a casket...

Francis – I meant for the elections... Today's vote. Have you voted yet?

Candice – Er... No, not yet...

Francis – Oh, so I still have a chance then... Are you familiar with our manifesto?

Candice – You have a manifesto? I thought you were from the Center Party?

Edmund enters.

Edmund – Hello Mr Martino. Please accept my condolences...

Francis changes his expression to one more suited to the circumstances.

Francis – Everything happens for a reason...? C'est la vie, isn't it...?

Edmund – At least she had a good death.

Francis – You think...?

Edmund – She didn't?

Francis – She was run over by a Southern Rail train...

Edmund – I'm sorry, I must be confusing with Mrs Mortarfield... She died in her sleep. She was 91 years old.

Francis – Ah, yes... My wife was a little younger than that...

Edmund realises that Candice is listening to their conversation with indiscrete curiosity.

Edmund – Would you get us a couple of coffees please, Candy...

Candice – Candice...

Edmund – Yes, whatever... You know how to make coffee...?

Candice – I can try...

Francis – Very strong for me, please.

Candice – Strong... Like the turnout today, am I right or am I right Mr Martino...?

Vague smile from Francis. Edmund is visibly exasperated.

Edmund – The coffee machine is over there...

Candice disappears.

Edmund – It's so hard to find competent staff these days... And my wife is in bed with the flu. You know it's very bad this year...

Francis – Yes, I know... it killed my wife...

Edmund – I thought she got run over by a train.

Francis – On her way to the pharmacy to get a flu jab...

Edmund – I always thought there was something fishy about this jab... And believe me, I know what I'm talking about... I even made my wife promise not to get it...

Francis – Mrs Birdseye is doing well?

Edmund – She's a little bit under the weather but she'll be up and about in a few days. It's best to let nature take its course, isn't it?

Francis – Unfortunately, my wife is a bit under the train.

Edmund – Have you made your choice, Mr Martino? As you can see from the catalogue, the new collection is absolutely gorgeous...

Francis (*barely looking at the catalogue*) – Hmm...

Edmund – It's like I always say: the price of the casket represents the love we had for our dearly departed.

Francis – I was thinking something quite simple, actually...

Edmund – I see... Something elegant yet discreet... Did you have a particular model in mind?

Francis (*pointing in the catalogue*) – What about this one...

Edmund (*not overjoyed*) – Basic Pine. Our entry model. Currently on sale.

Francis – 99 Pounds including VAT, is that right?

Edmund – That is right, Mr Martino...

Francis – I figured, since we're cremating her...

Edmund – You're right. Pine will be fine. You're in luck, I only have one left. It's a very popular model... And for the options, we can offer...

Francis – The basic model.

Edmund – Basic Pine, no options. Of course. Did you want to have a look at anything else?

Francis – No, I'm good for now, thank you...

Edmund – Perfect. Thank you Mr Martino. I've got it written down.

Candice arrives with the coffee. She gives a cup to Francis and another one to Edmund.

Francis – Thank you Miss...

Candice (*flirtatious*) – Candice....

Francis empties his cup in a single gulp and makes a face. Edmund, curious, dips his lips carefully in his and glares at Candice.

Edmund (*with an apologetic look at Francis*) – A little too strong, maybe...

Francis – Ah yes, it's...

Edmund – Strong enough to wake the dead...

Candice – Would you like a treat with your coffee, Mr MP?

Francis looks at her, tempted.

Edmund – I think Candice means to ask you if you'd like something to eat? We have cookies. My wife makes them.

Francis – If your wife is in charge of treats I think I'll abstain...

Candice – An MP choosing abstinence on election day...

Edmund – I think Candice means abstention.

Francis – And I'm not MP yet...

Francis' mobile phone rings. The ring tone sounds like an old fashioned alarm clock.

Francis – Excuse me... (*taking the call*) Yes...? So you have the advanced poll results? Yes... Yes... Yes... Oh... Very well, I'll be right over... No, the ceremony isn't until 11:00... That's right, in an hour... But it will be a small, intimate gathering... I don't want to exploit this terrible tragedy to gain the sympathy of the voters... Speaking of which, did you remember to call the press? Perfect, thank you... See you soon...

Edmund – So, how is the electoral campaign going? How are things looking so far?

As if by rote, Francis puts his mobile on the reception desk and pulls out two information leaflets from his pocket.

Francis – As you know, my wife was the one who wanted to run for this election. But because of this tragedy...

Edmund – Of course...

Candice – I've heard of 'zombie voters' when the dead cast votes, but I don't think they ever elected one in Parliament...

Edmund – On the other hand, given how few MPs attend Parliament sessions I'm not sure we'd even notice...

Francis (*handing the leaflets to Edmund and Candice*) – Here, at least let me give you some information on our manifesto.

Edmund – Oh, you have a manifesto... I thought you said you were... Never mind...

Francis – Truth be told, I don't have any political experience. But the Center Party is desperate for candidates...

Candice – For sure... It might be the only party with fewer members than candidates...

Edmund glares at her.

Francis – Anyway, they twisted my arm and I let them do it... Alright, I have to go... Something came up that I need to take care of.

Edmund – Nothing bad I hope?

Francis – I couldn't find anyone else so I asked my cleaning lady's daughter to be my running mate. But I've just been told she was arrested for solicitation...

Edmund – If the candidates can't proposition their constituents on the open market, democracy is doomed.

Francis – I know, right...?

Candice – If you're looking for a new running mate I could help you out...

Francis – Why not...? I promise to think about it...

Edmund – So we'll see you later for the ceremony...

Francis – Perfect.

Francis leaves. Edmund looks reproachfully at Candice.

Edmund – What did I tell you?

Candice – What?

Edmund – You were supposed to just answer the phone!

Candice – I was just trying to be nice to the customers...

Edmund – The delivery man still hasn't come?

Candice – No...

Edmund – At this rate we'll soon run out of stock...

Candice – Speaking of phone, I forgot to tell you. You're going to be proud of me, I made my first sale.

Edmund (*worried*) – I told you not to take any initiative...

Candice – Mrs Lakewell called. The MP's widow. She chose the Basic Pine model.

Edmund – Basic Pine?

Candice – Yes, I know, it's the cheapest but still... a sale's a sale.

Edmund – But we only have one left and I just sold it to Mr Martino for his wife!

Mrs Lakewell arrives.

Beatrix – Mr Birdseye. I wanted to see you.

Edmund – Hello Mrs Lakewell... and please accept my sincere condolences for your husband. But I'm sure he'd approve of your decision.

Beatrix – For the casket you mean? You're right, he was a man of the people, with very simple tastes...

Edmund – I meant for your candidacy! Running in his place in the elections...

Beatrix – Oh you know, I can't really focus on politics at the moment. (*She nonetheless has the presence of mind to hand Edmund and Candice two leaflets.*) If my husband's voters hadn't insisted that I run to save his seat... But I came here to talk to you about the funeral arrangements...

Edmund – Let me guess... you changed your mind and you want a different model... After all, Basic Pine, for an MP, that's a little...

Beatrix – No, no, not at all. Pine is fine. Especially since I have decided on a cremation.

Edmund – Oh, you too...

Beatrix – Pardon?

Edmund – No, I mean... It's a choice that is proving increasingly popular... Did you want to look at our catalogue again?

Candice (*in full salesman mode*) – It's our new collection. A quick glance can't hurt...

Edmund (*showing her the catalogue*) – Let's see... This Queen Victoria model for example... Mahogany...Thirty year warranty...

Beatrix looks at the catalogue without interest.

Beatrix – No thank you, really... And don't get me wrong, but Queen Victoria, Elizabeth 2, Prince Albert... that's not very democratic...

Candice – On the other hand, Basic Pine... that's a bit Ikea, no?

Edmund – Of course, if you choose a model that's a bit more expensive we would be willing to work on the price for you. Take your time and think about it.

Beatrix – Listen, I don't have a lot of time, and I've already thought about it. Basic Pine is fine...

Edmund – Well, to be totally honest...

Beatrix – Is there a problem?

Edmund – I'm terribly sorry, Mrs Lakewell, but I'm afraid this model is temporarily out of stock.

Beatrix – But... this young lady here told me on the phone earlier that...

Edmund – But since then I sold the last one we had to Mr Martino...

Beatrix – Martino? My opponent!

Edmund – It's a terrible misunderstanding and I beg you to please accept my deepest apologies... This young woman is new to the job and...

Beatrix – Out of the question!

Edmund – I can suggest another model... I'll give you a good price... Like an airplane upgrade if you like...

Beatrix – You should make this offer to Mr Martino.

(Just then Martino comes back)

Francis – I think I left my mobile phone here. *(He is surprised to see Beatrix.)* Mrs Lakewell...

Edmund – You two know each other, I think...

Beatrix – A little... Mrs Martino ran against my husband in the last by-elections...

Edmund – Oh... We're almost among family then...

Francis – I will take this opportunity to present my deepest condolences, Mrs Lakewell...

Edmund – Mr Martino is a gentleman. He will surely agree to let you have it.

Francis – Pardon?

Beatrix – It would seem, Mr Martino, that we aren't just competing for a seat in Parliament...

Edmund – My assistant promised Mrs Lakewell that she could have the last Basic Pine casket that we had...

Candice *(playfully)* – Oh come on, it's not that bad... It's not like you politicians never make promises you can't keep...

Francis – I'm sure we can find an arrangement... Can't we, Mr Birdseye?

Edmund – But of course... I am actually waiting for the new collection to be delivered any time now...

The phone rings and Candice picks up.

Candice – Birdseye Froz... Birdseye Funeral Home, how can I help you? Please hold.
(*To Edmund*) For you...

Edmund – Please excuse me for a minute... (*taking the phone*) Yes...? No...! Your delivery man has the flu? Is that a joke? When? This afternoon? But it'll be too late! This isn't over, you'll hear from me soon enough...

He hangs up, appalled.

Francis – Right, let's not spend the whole day on this... For Mrs Lakewell I am happy to choose another model... What can you offer?

Edmund – Well, I... I just heard that the delivery I was waiting for is being delayed by several hours...

Francis – So?

Edmund – That Basic Pine casket is the only casket we have in store...

Francis – The only casket? You mean that...

Edmund – I'm sorry but I don't have any other casket available right now... Unless we put Mrs Mortarfield back in the freezer... But she's already in the viewing room with her family...

Candice – Ah, yes, that's would be a little uncouth...

Everyone is dismayed.

Beatrix – My husband's funeral ceremony starts at 11:00!

Francis – My wife's too.

Edmund (*to himself, crushed*) – A casket for two... whatever next...

Beatrix – You're not seriously thinking of burying my husband and this man's wife in the same casket?

Francis – That wouldn't be good form.

Edmund – Maybe we can postpone one of the ceremonies until tomorrow morning...?

Candice – After all, they're not in a rush...

Beatrix – But I am!

Francis – I can't do tomorrow either... the press has already been called...

Beatrix – For my husband too... There's no reason why I should let my opponent take center stage!

Edmund – Right, so what do we do?

Francis – My wife, does she really need a casket...?

Edmund – Pardon ?

Francis – I mean... the casket is only for the cremation. That only lasts a few minutes.

Candice – It's true... None of that is very environmentally friendly... cutting down oak trees to just to make caskets that we then set fire to...

Francis – And don't get me started on greenhouse gases.

Candice – Maybe we could do it India-style, on a pile of dead wood, next to the Thames.

Beatrice – Yes, I think the press would love it...

Black.

ACT 2

Francis and Beatrix wait together in the reception area with appropriately somber faces. Francis glances at his watch.

Francis – How much longer do you think this is going to take...?

Beatrix – I don't know... I'm not too familiar...

Francis – I know it's weird... but something reminds me of being in a maternity ward, waiting to find out whether it's a boy or a girl... I don't know why...

Beatrix (*looks at him, worried*) – Yes, it is weird...

Francis – Do you know what you'll do with it?

Beatrix – Pardon?

Francis – Your husband's ashes... Where will you put them?

Beatrix – I haven't died yet... decided... (*a beat*) It's... How big is it?

Francis – I don't know... I think I'll keep it in a cabinet...

Beatrix – In the Cabinet...?

Francis – I mean a small cupboard...

Beatrix – Oh, right...

Francis – Yes... How fitting for an MP... To end up in a cabinet...

Beatrix – And you?

Francis – I don't know, but I won't keep it on the mantelpiece... it would be weird, wouldn't it?

Beatrix – Yes...

Francis – Maybe I'll spread them in the garden... Is that allowed?

Beatrix – I think so... No one's ever gone to prison for dispersing ashes in the garden...

Francis – Except Harold Shipman...

Beatrix – Hmm...

Francis – On the other hand, knowing that your spouse is all over the turf between the trampoline and the BBQ... it's a bit creepy don't you think?

Beatrix – Yes, maybe...

Francis – It's an important decision. You have to think carefully beforehand, because once it's done...

Beatrice – For sure... Unless you have a Dyson...

Francis – Do we really have to take them with us?

Beatrice – I think so... Like in a maternity ward...

Just then, Edmund and Candice arrive each carrying an urn.

Edmund – Where are the labels? Which one is the MP?

Candice – Crap... The labels...

Edmund – What about them?

Candice – I forgot to put them on the urns...

Edmund – But I told you to... There was a post-it with their name on each urn! You only had to screw in the plates!

Candice – I am really sorry...

Edmund – Do you at least remember which one contains the MP?

Candice's embarrassed silence tells all. But Edmund doesn't have time to react. Francis and Beatrice turn towards them with the faces of two grieving spouses. Edmund barely hesitates then hands his urn to Beatrice, so Candice gives hers to Francis.

Edmund – We'll give you a minute to reflect on your spouses' lives... (*he glares at Candice*) I should incinerate you too...

Candice – If it wasn't for me going to that cheap place to get the pine casket that you were missing...

Edmund – A flat pack casket, I didn't even know there was such a thing...

Candice – At least they weren't out of stock...

Edmund – Yeah, yeah, yeah, all right...

Candice – And now look at them... Birdseye or cheap flat pack... no one can tell the difference...

Edmund – You can say that again... There's a 50/50 chance that Mrs Lakewell is currently mourning over Mrs Martino's ashes.

Candice – And Mr Martino over those of Mr Lakewell...

Edmund – And the flat pack wasn't easy to put together either...

Candice – Yes... From that point too it felt a lot like Ikea.

They leave. Francis and Beatrice each look at their urns, deep in their thoughts.

Francis – Ashes to ashes...

Beatrice – Dust to dust...

Francis – How did your husband die again?

Beatrix – He drowned...

Francis – He drowned?

Beatrix – It's a fishy story. He must have fallen off his boat. They didn't find his body for six weeks.

Francis – And he couldn't swim...

Beatrix – He never said... But I never did see him swim when he was alive.

Francis – Most people don't brag about not being able to swim...

A beat.

Beatrix – And your wife?

Francis – A road accident.

Beatrix – Ah, yes...

Francis – At a dangerous level crossing... Her car stalled on the tracks... She didn't have time to drive away...

Beatrix – If I am elected I promise to fix this level crossing.

Francis – Thank you... And if I win, I promise to pass a law making swimming lessons mandatory for fishermen.

They remain quiet for a moment, contemplating the urns.

Francis – To think that they were opponents in the last elections. And now look at them. Each in their urn...

Beatrix – Yes...

Francis – Politics doesn't become them...

Beatrix – No...

Francis – I hope we won't end up the same way.

Beatrix – At least not any time soon...

Francis – Speaking of which, have you seen the last polls?

Beatrix – Yes....

Francis – It's very close.

Beatrix – But I should still have the advantage... My husband can rest in peace...

Francis – Hmmm... During the last elections your friends were accused of ballot stuffing...

Edmund and Candice come back.

Edmund – Look at them, they're becoming friends...

Candice – It'll end up with a wedding, mark my words. (*Edmund looks at her reproachfully.*) What? They're both widowed, aren't they?

Francis and Beatrix spot them.

Beatrix – Right, we'll leave you to it...

Edmund – Please take your time... you can stay as long as you want...

Candice – And you'll always be welcome here...

Edmund looks at her reproachfully.

Francis – Can I drop you off somewhere? I have a mini van...

Beatrix – I don't know if...

Francis – You're right of course... I'm sorry... People will talk...

Candice walks over to Beatrix.

Candice – Let me help you... These things are a little heavy...

Beatrix – I'll be fine, thanks.

Candice awkwardly tries to grab Beatrix's urn, knocking over the one Francis is holding which falls to the ground. Part of the contents spill on the floor. Edmund is aghast.

Beatrix – Oh my God!

Edmund (*devastated*) – It's a nightmare...

Candice – I'm so sorry... I'll fix this right away...

Edmund – Don't touch anything, I've got it...

Edmund disappears.

Candice – It's never happened before, I promise...

Edmund returns wearing a novelty apron and carrying a broom and dust pan.

Edmund – I'll take care of it.

Under the astounded looks of the other three he sweeps the ashes, pushes them on the dustpan and is about to pour them back into the urn. But he goes for the wrong urn.

Francis – Err, no, that's her husband.

Edmund – My bad... (*Edmund pours the ashes in the other urn*). There, this little accident is now behind us.

Candice picks something up from the floor.

Candice – Oh look... What's this?

Edmund (*embarrassed*) – Sometimes there are... parts... Lead fillings, for example...

Candice – Yeah, well... Whoever's in that urn was full of lead alright. Looks like a bullet... Large caliber...

General dismay.

Edmund (*looking more closely at the bullet*) – Oh, yes...? Did your wife die in a hunting accident?

Francis – Er, no... I told you, a vaccine accident...

Candice – More like a suppository accident!

Edmund – Looks like lead-shot...

Candice – Whoa, Mr Martino... If it turns out you mistook your wife for a wild boar... that's not going to help your election bid...

Francis takes the bullet from Candice and looks at it closely.

Francis (*embarrassed*) – I don't understand, I really don't...

Embarrassed silence.

Candice – Actually... Now would be a good time to tell you... I'm not entirely sure this is your wife's ashes...

Francis – Excuse me?

Candice – I may have mixed up the labels...

Edmund – What she means is that this bullet could just as well come from the MP's urn...

Francis glances at Beatrix, who looks destroyed

Francis – I see...

Beatrix – I can explain...

Francis (*surprised*) – Oh, can you now...?

Beatrix (*to Edmund and Candice*) – Could you give us a moment, please.

Edmund and Candice leave discreetly.

Francis – Do you have something to tell me?

Beatrix goes to grab the bullet from Francis.

Beatrix – Give me that!

Francis – Not so fast...

Beatrix falls apart.

Beatrix – Alright, I killed him...

Francis – You?

Beatrix – My husband didn't drown.

Francis – But you made it look like an accident...

Beatrix – Yes...

Francis – Why?

Beatrix – So I wouldn't get caught, why do you think?

Francis – No, I mean... why did you kill him?

Beatrix – Don't tell me you didn't know?

Francis – Didn't know what?

Beatrix – My husband was having an affair.

Francis – And how would I know that?

Beatrix – Because he was having an affair with your wife! You really didn't know?

Francis (*distraught*) – No, I didn't...

Beatrix – I killed my husband with his hunting rifle. And then I made it look like a fishing accident...

Francis – Wow, that's twisted...

Beatrix – It almost worked... If the body had remained at the bottom of the sea, like I had planned...

Francis – Unfortunately, the past always comes to the surface...

Beatrix – I thought that with a cremation it would be over once and for all... But of course the bullet didn't burn.

Francis – Wasn't there an autopsy?

Beatrix – Our family doctor signed the death certificate. He's old. And near sighted. He didn't look too closely.

Francis – I see... But this is a crime of passion, judges can be rather understanding. Are you sure you didn't kill him to take his seat in Parliament?

Beatrix – The only reason I am running is to get parliamentary immunity, you never know, in case it turns out I do need it...

Francis – A sort of comprehensive insurance...

Beatrix – Are you going to go to the cops?

Francis – That depends on you. (*Showing the bullet*) No one else knows but me...

Beatrix moves close to him with a suggestive look on her face.

Beatrix – I am yours to do as you wish... I will be your plaything...

In doing so, Beatrix trips on the other urn whose contents partially spill on the floor.

Francis – You can start by dropping out of the elections...

Black

ACT 3

Edmund is busy at reception. Candice enters.

Candice – Hello, hello...!

Edmund – You're improving... Only 30 minutes late... You didn't fall asleep on the bus today?

Candice – Oh no, I did... But I woke up a couple of stops before the end of the line... You can't do this without me, am I right?

Edmund – Hmmm...

Candice – So, Mr Birdseye? How's business?

Edmund – Rather quiet this week. Last week we were buried.

Candice – Buried?

Edmund – Just a manner of speaking...

As she takes her coat off, she looks towards the election posters outside.

Candice – Oh, did you see that? In the end it's the bloke from the Center Party who got elected.

Edmund – Yes... Mrs Lakewell pulled out of the election...

Candice – But she's now working for him as a Parliamentary Assistant.

Edmund – Too bad for you. That position is now filled.

Candice – I told you it would end with a wedding.

Edmund – You're very good at reading people...

Candice – Your wife is here?

Edmund – Next door.

Candice (*disappointed*) – So you don't need me any more then.

Edmund – Well, I mean... She's there but... My wife died following complications from the flu...

Candice – I'm so sorry... Please accept my condolences...

Edmund – Thank you.

Candice – When did it happen?

Edmund – Last night. I should have let her get the flu jab in the end...

Candice – At least, with you here she'll get a beautiful funeral...

Edmund – Mmm... yeah...

Candice – You can show her how much you loved her. It's like you always say : the price of the casket represents the love we had for our dearly departed.... Which model did you choose?

Edmund – Basic Pine...

Candice – Oh, right, it's... Natural wood is a very warm material.

Edmund – Very easy to burn too. I chose to cremate her.

Candice – Of course.

Edmund – So naturally... I'm going to need to replace her... Permanently.

Candice – Replace her...?

Edmund – Here, in the shop.

Candice – Oh, of course... So I'm not a temp anymore...?

Edmund – I can give you a three month contract to start with. With my wife dead I also need someone to handle the thanatopraxy...

Candice – Thanatopraxy...

Edmund – My specialty is the larger jobs. Sometimes they're more like puzzles... with missing pieces...

Candice – Like with Mrs Martino... You did such a great job with that one...

Edmund – You can say that again... When they brought her in, after the train ran over her car... She looked like a Bacon...

Candice – Like streaky bacon?

Edmund – Anyway... My wife used to do the detailed work... So now that she's gone, if you're interested...

Candice – I don't know if I could...

Edmund – It's not very complicated you know. It's a little like being a beautician, but our clients never complain...

Candice – Why not...

Edmund – And there's no such thing as a typical day at the office. As you saw yourself, there's always something to challenge you...

Candice – And you get to meet celebrities...

Edmund – That's the thing... Rich or poor, famous or not, everyone ends up in our capable hands...

Candice starts sweeping the floor.

Candice – And what are you planning to do about the bullet we found in the MP's urn?

Edmund – What can we do... We're not the police... And we are bound by the undertaker-client privilege... since our jobs require that we become intimate with families and their secrets...

Candice – Really?

Edmund – You have no idea what we find in the dearly departed' pockets... Once I even found a winning scratch card.

Candice – His widow must have been happy...

Edmund – Oh, as you can imagine I didn't tell her anything. It would have been out of place...

Candice – Of course...

Edmund – That's how I got the espresso machine, actually... Speaking of which, do you want a coffee?

Candice – Why not...?

Edmund disappears briefly to go get the coffees.

Edmund (off) – Just last week I found a pair of scissors in Mrs Mortarfield's ashes.

Candice – Was she assassinated too?

Edmund – Surgical scissors! She was just in hospital for an appendicitis... she died of complications...

Candice – Remind me to ask you for the name of the hospital... In case I have to be hospitalised.

Edmund returns with the coffee.

Candice – I wanted to thank you for giving me a chance. I won't disappoint you, you know...

Edmund – I already got to sample your skill-set...

Candice notices something in the dust that she is sweeping.

Candice – What's this...?

Edmund comes closer and looks at the object she is holding in his direction.

Edmund – A second bullet?

Candice (profoundly) – There was a second shooter involved in Mr Lakewell's killing... It's not a murder it's an assassination!

Edmund – You spend too much time watching television, Candice... He was an MP, sure, but he wasn't Kennedy. *(Thinking)* What if this bullet came from the other urn...

Candice – Well done, Detective... Do you think Mr Martino could have filled his bird with lead...

Edmund – Before he made her take the 5:23pm Southern Rail to Brighton...

Candice – In the face... in her car.

Edmund – Yes, it's a possibility...

Candice – But why?

Edmund – Jealousy! You didn't know his wife had slept all over town...?

Candice – No...

Edmund – Their marriage was a train-wreck.

Candice – Unless he killed his wife only so the electors would feel sorry for a widower... to get more votes.

Edmund – Go figure...

Candice – Well, in any case, he's now got parliamentary immunity.

Edmund looks through the display window.

Edmund – Speaking of the devil...

Candice –... brings the devil to the door

Francis and Beatrix come in the store.

Candice – Looks like business is picking up.

Edmund – Mr Martino, Mrs Lakewell. What brings you here? Not another bereavement I hope?

Francis – No, no, thank goodness...

Edmund – Please let me take this opportunity to congratulate you on your election, Mr Martino.

Francis – Thank you, Edmund.

Candice (*to Beatrix*) – Not too disappointed?

Beatrix – I am his Parliamentary Assistant... That means that if anything were to happen to Mr Martino, his seat would become mine. I follow his every move, ready to step in.

Edmund – Like a sort of understudy...

Candice – Stay safe... Watch out for stray bullets... They come out of nowhere when you're out fishing.

Edmund – Or when you're safely stopped at a level crossing...

Beatrix looks at Francis suspiciously. He changes the subject.

Francis – No, this time it is us who come to present our condolences.

Edmund – Who died...?

Beatrix – Your wife!

Edmund – Oh, that's right... I'm sorry, I am so distraught...

Francis – Yes, well, life goes on...

Beatrix – Speaking of which, we also came to share our good news.

Candice – You're having a baby?

Beatrix – Not yet...

Francis – Beatrix and I are getting married.

Beatrix – We can now look to the future and over our shoulder at the same time.

We hear the sound of a kitchen oven's timer going off.

Beatrix – You've got something in the oven? You should go check, it smells like it's burning.

Edmund – Er, no, it's... it's my wife.

Francis – Your wife?

Edmund – Well, her ashes.

Beatrix – Oh, I see...

Edmund – Could you go check, Candice? I don't think I can handle this right now...

Candice – Of course Mr Birdseye.

Francis – Right, I think we'll let you go.

Beatrix – We just came for the wreath.

Edmund – A wreath? For your wedding?

Beatrix – For your wife's funeral.

Francis – Make sure it says it's from the MP.

Beatrix – And his Parliamentary Assistant.

Edmund – Of course.

Francis – I'll let you choose... Just sent the invoice to my office.

Edmund – Thank you Mr MP. Thank you Mrs Parliamentary Assistant. Know that I am very moved by this respectful gesture during my very difficult time.

Beatrix – Good buy Mr Birdseye.

Francis (*shaking his hand*) – Edmund...

Francis and Beatrix leave.

Edmund – Right, that's done...

Candice comes back.

Candice – They left?

Edmund – You were right... It ends with a wedding...

Candice looks through the front window.

Candice – They are such a great match... It was obvious from the start...

Edmund – Hmm... What about us? We make a good couple too, don't we?

Candice – You think?

Edmund – And now that I am a widower...

Candice – Speaking of which, I found this in Mrs Birdseye's ashes... *(She shows a third bullet)* I thought your wife died of the flu...

Edmund – I told you... the flu is devastating this year...

Black.

End.

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 theater and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and almost 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.

He graduated in Spanish and English literature (Sorbonne), in linguistics (Ecole des Hautes Etudes en Sciences Sociales), in economics (Institut d'Études Politiques de Paris) and scriptwriting (Conservatoire Européen d'Écriture Audiovisuelle).

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his website La Comédiathèque (comediatheque.net). However, public productions are subject to SACD filing.

For those who want to read the texts or work from a traditional book format, a paper copy can be purchased from Amazon.

Other plays by the same author in English

An innocent little murder

Cheaters

Critical but Stable

Friday the 13th

Him and Her

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

The Worst Village in England

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