

La Comédiathèque

*One Marriage
out of two*

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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One marriage out of two

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Translation by the author

One marriage out of two ends in divorce... That night, Steven has to tell his in-laws, who idealize him, that he is getting divorced from their daughter, whom he cheated on. It is at that moment that Mabel's parents announce to the couple that they are giving them their house in Kensington to raise their future children. How to reignite the flame without appearing simply interested in real estate?

Characters

Robert
Victoria
Mabel
Steven

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Act 1

An upscale living room. The table is set for four. In one corner, a Christmas tree. Robert, a conservative man in his sixties, and Victoria, an elegant woman in her fifties, are sitting at either end of the sofa. They remain silent for a moment. An antique pendulum clock or a cuckoo clock, chiming eight o'clock, jolts them out of their torpor.

Robert – Did they tell you what time they were arriving?

Victoria – Half past eight. But you know how it is. With the traffic...

Robert – From Newham to Kensington... On a day like today, it'll take them at least an hour...

Victoria – What a stupid idea to move to the East!

Robert – It's cheaper than the city centre...

Victoria – The East is always cheaper. I don't know why. Look at Berlin... even after the fall of the Wall, it's still cheaper...

Robert – Steven has to work late... He is filling in at a NHS dental practice in Newham... Over there, women received dental care after work...

Victoria – When they can afford to get their teeth treated... I went to see them once by tube. It's frightening... People have severely decayed teeth over there...

Robert – Did you take the tube?

Victoria – I had one tube ticket left, but it wasn't valid anymore. Do you know that now there are cards called Oyster cards?

Robert – I did a replacement in Newham when I was young, just after I got my Bachelor of Dental Surgery.

Victoria – Back when there were still tube tickets.

Robert – In the days when there were merely ticket punchers. But for a dentist, the job is not very lucrative in those neighbourhoods. Just a little descaling once a year for New Year's Eve, and that's it.

Victoria – Stephane is brave.

Robert – Yes.

Victoria – Finding him was a stroke of luck for her.

Robert – Yeah...

A pause.

Victoria – Did the lawyer give you all the papers?

Robert – Yes, yes, they are there on the filing cabinet... We just need to sign them...

Victoria – Okay. (*Silence*) Can you believe it? This is the last Christmas we will host our daughter and her husband there... I mean, together, at our place...

Robert – Are you really sure about this? We still have time to change our minds. Once we've told Steven and Mabel... We can't go back...

Victoria – That's why we have to tell them tonight. Otherwise, we'll never do it. (*Silence*) It will be quite a shock for them...

Robert – We could wait a little bit. There's no rush...

Victoria – We've talked about this a hundred times. What's the point of delaying it for another month or two...

Robert – You're right. We need to turn the page.

Victoria – It's almost a new year. We're still young. We can start a new life...

Robert – I'm not as young as you...

Victoria – Come on... I know women still find you attractive...

Robert – We have lived together for thirty years in this house. That's not nothing...

Victoria – These last few years, we were constantly arguing over nothing. It was no longer possible, Robert, you know that. It's better to stop before we become real enemies to each other. That's not what you want.

Robert – No, of course not.

Victoria – Well, it may be a little tough at first. For you and for me. But then life will take over again. We'll invent new habits, each on our own. With other people...

Robert – Yes, of course...

Victoria – I assure you, it's better for everyone. And as I said, by dividing our assets in half, we'll escape taxes.

Robert – You're right. But still... It's going to be a shock for them...

Victoria – They're adults, aren't they? And now that she's married...

Robert – Yes.

Victoria – Come on, I have to attend to the dishes that are cooking. (*She gets up.*) You didn't forget to get the bread from the bakery, did you?

Robert – Damn it, the bread... You see, I'm already starting to lose my mind...

Victoria – Well, you just have to go back there...

Robert – Yes, yes, I'm going.

Victoria – Hurry, it's going to close... And you know that at this time, often they only have sliced bread or crackers left...

Robert (*getting up*) – Or worse – walnut bread.

Victoria – It's good with cheese.

Robert – I hate walnut bread.

Victoria – You see, Robert? That's the problem with married life! You don't like walnut bread, so I'm not allowed to eat it!

Robert – Bread makes you fat. So walnut bread...

Victoria – You think I'm too fat, is that it?

Robert – Come on, let's not start arguing again. Not now...

Victoria – No.

Robert – You're right, I think we made the right decision...

Robert walks towards the entrance. Marion sighs and disappears into the kitchen. Steven, a conservative-looking man in his early thirties, with a Lacoste polo shirt and loafers, and Mabel, a slightly younger woman in maternity clothes, come in. Steven has a bouquet of flowers in one hand and a few gift packages in the other.

Steven – We didn't have too much traffic after all... We took barely twenty minutes to come...

Mabel (*to the room*) – Is anyone here?

Steven drops his gifts under the Christmas tree, but keeps the bouquet in his hand.

Steven – What did you end up buying for your mother? So I can sound a bit informed...

Mabel – You'll see, it's a surprise... (*raising her voice*) Hello, anyone here?

Steven – The house is so big... From the kitchen, you can't hear the doorbell. It is a good thing I have the keys.

Mabel – Yeah... By the way, I didn't really understand why my mother gave you the keys to the house. After all, I'm their daughter...

Steven – I come more often... I'm the one who takes care of your father's accounting...

Mabel – Yes, but that's precisely what I don't understand. I'm an accountant, right? (*Pause*) And up until now, it was my mother who took care of the accounting for the dental practice!

Steven – I just give her a hand with the computer. At her age, she won't get into it anymore...

Mabel – Because I couldn't help my father with the computer...?

Steven – Apparently, he prefers to deal with a colleague... And he says that you complicate everything... It's not entirely untrue, is it?

Mabel – Is there a subliminal message?

Steven – Not at all...

Mabel – Because I don't accept my husband getting a blowjob from his assistant between fillings, I'm complicating everything?

Steven – If we could avoid vulgarity...

Mabel – Do you prefer the word fellatio?

Steven – If need be, yes... Even though technically...

Mabel – Technically?

Steven – I'm not sure we can really call it cheating on your wife, that's all.

Mabel – That's it... Talk to Bill Clinton about it...

Steven – His wife didn't divorce him...

Mabel – But you're not the President of the United States... You don't have nuclear power... In the meantime, you have to talk to my parents, remember?

Steven – Are you sure you really want to divorce?

Mabel – I thought you were going to add "for such a trivial matter"...

Steven – We could wait a week or two before telling them. Just to let the Christmas break pass. It'll be a shock for them...

Mabel – And me, do you think it didn't shock me to walk into your office and see you lying on the chair getting liposuctioned by that slut in a nurse uniform...?

Steven – I know, it was a serious error of judgment on my part...

Mabel – At least now I know where you hid your judgment faculty...

Steven – And I've already apologized for it, but... We could think a bit more...

Mabel – It's all figured out.

Steven – Think about the baby...

Mabel – And have you thought about him?

Steven – But why should it be up to me to tell them? You're the one who wants to divorce, not me. And they're your parents, after all!

Mabel – Why? Because if I tell them, they won't believe me, you know! And then it would be too easy, right? They hold you in such high regard! You're the perfect son-in-law! No, I want to hear you say it in front of me: "I'm just a scoundrel, I cheated on your daughter..."

Steven – Technically...

Mabel – OK, then if you prefer: "Yes, I got a blow job from my assistant." Does that work for you as an expression? It's a bit old-fashioned, but anyway... I'm not sure they'll understand 'fellatio.'

Steven – It's going to shock them...

Mabel – That's right, a salutary shock... an electric shock! I want to see you with my own eyes come down from the pedestal on which they unfairly placed you, while I've always been considered a fool! (*Raising her voice upon seeing the bouquet that Steven still holds*) I had told you that I wasn't in favour of giving a bouquet.

Steven – It's Christmas after all

Mabel (*screaming*) – "Mom!"

Steven – Don't shout so loud... Why are you getting upset...? She'll eventually arrive... But the house is so big...

Mabel – And to think that we live in a studio in Newham for the two of us.

Steven – Soon to be three...

Mabel – You're not planning on living with us after the divorce, are you?

Steven – No, of course not...

Mabel – We'll have to bleed ourselves dry to pay for their retirement! And as a token of appreciation, the health insurance promises us only a caregiver to change our diapers if we live to be a hundred...

Victoria returns from the kitchen with a vase.

Victoria – Oh, you're here? I didn't hear you come in...

Steven – Hello, mum-in-law.

While Victoria puts her vase on a small table, Mabel, beside herself, speaks to Steven aside.

Mabel – And if you could stop calling her 'mum-in-law', considering what you have to tell her tonight...

Victoria notices the bouquet that Steven is holding out to her.

Victoria – Oh, my dear Steven, thank goodness you're here... Always so thoughtful... My husband wouldn't give me flowers... Nor would my daughter... I bet it was you who picked out my Christmas gift, as usual... Isn't that right?

Steven – Well, you see...

Mabel – You know I have a perfect husband.

Victoria – And I have an ideal son-in-law! Isn't that right, my dear Steven?

Victoria warmly embraces her son-in-law, while Mabel looks on with exasperation.

Steven – You should put them in water right away...

Victoria – You're right. And I know you so well, you see. I already brought the vase...

Victoria takes the flowers and prepares to put them in the vase.

Mabel – And me, don't you give me a kiss?

Victoria – Yes, yes, of course...

Victoria kisses her daughter much less warmly than her son-in-law, then puts the flowers in the water and steps back to admire them.

Victoria – They're really beautiful. (*She turns to her daughter.*) You, on the other hand, look unwell, my dear...

Mabel – Thanks...

Victoria – What can you do... Some women have a glow during pregnancy, and others... Well, it was the same for me. When I was pregnant with you, I looked terrible and couldn't stop vomiting.

Mabel – Yes, I know... You never miss an opportunity to remind me.

Victoria – Did you get the results of your ultrasound? Is the baby doing well?

Mabel – Yes, everything's fine with the baby, don't worry.

Victoria – And you still don't want to know if it's a boy or a girl? What a strange idea...

Steven – We prefer to be surprised.

Mabel – Yes... Actually, Steven has another surprise for you... Right, Steven?

Victoria – Ah, really?

Steven looks embarrassed and is saved by Robert's arrival with a baguette under his arm and a bottle of champagne in his hand.

Robert – I also picked up a bottle of champagne... To drink with the yule log. And we need to celebrate... If you can say that...

Steven – Celebrate what?

Mabel – What are we celebrating?

Robert (*to Victoria*) – You haven't told them yet?

Victoria – I was still waiting for you...

Steven and Mabel look perplexed.

Robert – Why do you look so worried? Is there a problem with the baby?

Steven – No, no, don't worry, nothing serious.

Mabel – Well, actually...

Victoria – Well, we know it must be difficult for you right now...

Mabel – Oh really?

Victoria – Living on top of each other in that small apartment in Newham.

Victoria – Anyway... Living on top of each other like that, we can imagine it doesn't do much for the harmony of the couple...

Robert (*jokingly*) – Ah, that... Living on top of each other... It depends, right?

Victoria – And as for starting a family...

Robert – They say that in London, one marriage out of two ends in divorce...

Mabel – Yes, by the way, Steven had something to tell you about that...

Robert – Oh, really?

Victoria – Well, we also have some big news to announce to you.

Steven – Oh, really?

Mabel – Us first, if you don't mind.

Steven – But no, come on...

Victoria – Steven is right. It's better that you first listen to what your father and I have to tell you. I have a feeling it could solve all your problems.

Mabel – Do you think so?

Robert – Well, at least it will probably make you much more comfortable to talk to us about the subject that concerns you.

Mabel – Don't tell me you're getting a divorce too?

Victoria – Of course not, what a strange idea!

Robert – At our age...

Victoria – Why though?

Mabel – Do you have cancer?

Robert – No, not at all!

Victoria – You almost sound disappointed!

Steven – So what's going on, mum-in-law?

Robert – We're not going to discuss this standing up, come on. Sit down, we'll have an aperitif.

Victoria (*with an underlying tone*) – Make yourselves at home...

They all sit around the coffee table, and Robert serves the aperitif from the bottles on top.

Robert – Port for everyone, as usual? Except for the pregnant woman, of course...

Steven – Come on...

Robert raises his glass and the others follow suit.

Robert – To your love!

Victoria – And to our grandson!

Mabel – It might be a girl...

Robert – It's not our first choice, but oh well...

Victoria – If it's a girl, we'll love her just the same!

Robert – We've already had girl...

They clink glasses and take a sip.

Victoria – Have some peanuts...

Robert – So, we're not going to keep you in suspense any longer.

He turns to Victoria.

Victoria (*to Robert*) – You go ahead...

Robert – Ah, no, the honour is yours! It was your idea to begin with. Even though I have to say I fully subscribe to it now. I don't know if I have a choice, actually...

Victoria – Well, here it is... You see, there's no gift for you under the Christmas tree... My poor Mabel, this time I didn't knit you a sweater...

Mabel (*disappointed*) – Is that your surprise?

Victoria – Because we decided to give you a gift this year that doesn't fit in a package...

Steven (*politely interested*) – Really...?

Mabel – Let me guess... A camping tent? Since you insisted that our apartment was really too small.

Robert – Ah, you're close...

Mabel – Steven, you can pitch it in the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, while waiting to find another place to live.

Robert – Come on, let your mother speak, otherwise, we'll never get there.

Victoria – There you go... As you know, Robert will retire from the dental practice next spring.

Mabel (*astonished, to Steven*) – Did you know about this?

Steven looks embarrassed.

Robert – We will make our apartment in Benidorm our primary residence...

Victoria – And we have decided to gift this house in Kensington to you to raise your future children together.

Steven and Mabel look stunned.

Fade to black.

ACT 2

The same place, exactly where we left them.

Robert – It seems like you're not happy...

Steven – Ah, no, no... I mean... We weren't expecting this at all... Right, Mabel?

Mabel – But... why now?

Robert – It's Christmas!

Victoria – If we don't do it now, we'll never do it...

Robert – Victoria is right... I'm not getting any younger, you know...

Steven – Come on, you're still in your prime, both of you!

Victoria – Exactly. If we want to enjoy some of the good years we have left, it's now! Right, Robert?

Robert – At 80... If it's just to walk along the Levante Beach with a walker... We might as well directly pay for a good medicalised retirement home.

Victoria – I understand that you're a little disoriented about not having us around in London, but...

Robert – You can come and visit us anytime you want!

Victoria – And send us your children during school holidays, of course!

Steven – I... We don't know what to say... Right, Mabel...?

Mabel – Yes... We can definitely say that we're speechless...

Victoria – It's true that this house has become too big for us.

Robert – And let's not even talk about the fuel bill, otherwise, you won't want to take it!

Victoria – We don't have any children to take care of anymore...

Mabel – I've never really been a burden to you, have I?

Steven – Come on, Mabel...

Victoria – You'll soon need more space.

Robert – And Kensington... It'll be much better than Newham, right?

Victoria – When this child goes to school...

Robert (*laughing*) – If you don't want him to learn Urdu as his first language.

Victoria – Here, we have a few individuals from the Philippines. Someone has to vacuum the floor from time to time...

Steven – It's true that...

Mabel – What?

Steven – Nothing.

Victoria – Honestly, before Mabel's wedding, we would have never thought of leaving her this house...

Mabel – Thanks for clarifying...

Robert – We have to admit that you can be a bit fanciful sometimes.

Mabel – I'm a chartered accountant. We're known for that.

Robert – But with Steven...

Victoria – We know we can trust him. Right, my little Steven...?

Steven smiled, embarrassed.

Robert – Well, then it's settled. Let's sit down to eat.

Victoria – But you also had something to announce, didn't you?

Steven – Uh... Yes...

Victoria – We're listening, my little Steven...

Steven – So, here it is... Mabel and I...

Mabel (*interrupting*) – At this point, maybe it can wait until dessert, right?

Robert (*to Victoria*) – By the way, have you thought about defrosting the yule log?

Victoria – Well, if you wanted to talk to us about your housing problems, they're solved.

Robert – And I have to put this bottle of champagne in the fridge...

Victoria – With this huge house... To fill it, we'll need at least half a dozen grandchildren.

Robert – Alright, you better go take care of your roast beef, otherwise... Time and tide wait for no man

Victoria – I'm going...

Robert – I'll go with you...

Steven also stands up. Mabel, devastated, remains seated.

Victoria – Stay seated, Mabel. I remind you that you're pregnant...

Mabel (*ironic*) – Oh yes, thank you for reminding me... I'm so flighty, I forget all the time...

The parents gaze affectionately at their daughter's belly.

Robert – Have you already found a name for the baby?

Mabel – We don't know if it's a girl or a boy...

Robert – Oh, yes, that's right... What a strange idea...

Victoria – Alright, we'll leave you time to discuss all this among yourselves. But all the papers are there, on the filing cabinet. You just have to sign them.

Robert – We'll do that at dessert time.

Victoria – At the time of gift-giving.

Steven – I'm not sure ours will measure up...

Mabel (*looking towards the tree*) – Shit, the gift...

Robert – We knew it was going to shock you.

Robert and Victoria, all smiles, go out to the kitchen.

Mabel (*after a while*) – Ah, the bastards...

Steven – Pardon?

Mabel – Did you hear them? They would have never given me anything while they were alive!

Steven – But... They want to give you their house...

Mabel – Them? Give me something? Even my mother's old Fiesta, she was so proud to tell me six months ago that she managed to sell it for 600 euros on eBay! And here I am, struggling in public transport, heavily pregnant, to go work!

Steven – You don't have a driving license...

Mabel – What's the point of getting one when I don't have a car?

Steven – Yes, of course...

Mabel – They never gave me anything, I'm telling you!

Steven – They did pay for your studies though.

Mabel – Are you kidding me? I had to do cleaning jobs to pay for my university registration and buy my meal tickets! I even had to speak with a foreign accent, otherwise, no one in Kensington wanted to hire me illegally!

Steven – I think your father would have preferred you to become a dentist like him...

Mabel – Even so... You don't cut off your daughter's allowance just because she decided to become an accountant...

Steven – Of course...

Mabel – They never gave me a gift, except for a sweater knitted by my mother at Christmas, and now they're ready to leave their own house to my husband! A bastard who cheats on me with anything that moves.

Steven – You're exaggerating...

Mabel (*on the verge of tears*) – I can't believe it...

Steven – Come on, don't get yourself worked up like that...

Steven makes a gesture towards her to comfort her, but she pushes him away.

Mabel – My father would have never even let me see his accounting, and with you, he would be ready to give the PIN code of his credit card!

Steven – But I didn't ask for anything!

Mabel – They had already given you the keys to the house, that was a sign...

Steven – Listen, I'm really sorry. But if it can reassure you, I'm not going to accept this gift... I mean, even in our common name...

Mabel – You didn't seem in a hurry to say no earlier!

Steven – It seemed to make them so happy...

Mabel – Yeah, right...

Steven – Anyway, as soon as they come back, I'll tell them the whole truth...

Mabel – What truth?

Steven – You know well...

Mabel – I thought you didn't want to get divorced.

Steven – No, of course not. But now, how can I do otherwise? I would look like I want to stay with you only to inherit a house in Kensington... Besides, I'm going to tell them right away and I'm leaving. Let's spare you that.

Mabel – Oh no, that's out of the question!

Steven – Do you really want to witness that painful scene?

Mabel – You stay here, and you're not going to tell them anything!

Steven – But I thought that...

Mabel – That was before.

Steven – You don't want to get divorced anymore?

Mabel – Not before my parents sign these damn papers!

Steven (*astonished*) – But...

Mabel – Can you believe it? They could live to be a hundred! If I inherit at 80, what on earth am I going to do with all their money? So not a word until dessert, do you hear me? We sign the papers, and in two or three months, we tell them we're getting a divorce. By the time they move to Benidorm and I take possession of the house...

Steven – But, that's... It would be immoral!

Mabel – You're talking to me about morality? *(Pause)* You owe me this much, don't you?

Steven – Fine...

Mabel – And think about it, if I become the owner before we divorce, your alimony will be reduced accordingly...

Steven is about to respond, but he is interrupted by the ringing of his phone. He answers absentmindedly.

Steven – Yes... *(Embarrassed)* No, listen, this isn't the right time. *(He moves away, but remains pursued by Mabel's gaze.)* I know, but I don't see how we can continue to work together after... this regrettable incident. We can't really call it a dismissal... Let's say it's a transfer, since I immediately offered you a position as an assistant in another dental practice... Yes, of course, you start on Monday... Very well... No... No, I don't want to discuss that now... I... I'm hanging up, okay?

Mabel – So she has your cell phone number too.

Steven – She's my assistant... Or rather, she was... You know very well that after what happened, I immediately decided to part ways with her...

Mabel – Part ways with her?

Steven – I mean... Not keep her at the dental practice...

Mabel – And you found her another job? Very chivalrous of you. I have to admit, in this case, if I may say so, you behaved like a gentleman...

Steven – I couldn't just fire her like that.

Mabel – Yes, of course... It would have been difficult to invoke professional misconduct... *(Sarcastic)* She was a good worker, wasn't she? From what I could glimpse of the extent of her skills...

Steven – If I hadn't offered her a deal, I could have had problems with labor court.

Mabel – Well, yes... After all, it's true, she didn't rape you... And which firm did you manage to find her another job at that matched her talent?

Steven – You're not going to like it, but there was urgency...

Mabel – Go ahead...

Steven – Since I handle his accounting, I knew that your father's assistant was retiring on December 31st...

Mabel looks shocked. Robert returns.

Robert – And there you go! The beef is in the oven! The time to eat the appetizers, in half an hour it will be ready. I hope it won't be overcooked. (*To Steven*) I told her to lower the oven temperature, but you know how women are... They never listen to what we say... Would you like some more port, my dear son-in-law?

Steven – No, thank you, I'm good...

Robert (*to Mabel*) – Of course, I'm not offering you any... (*To Steven*) Today, in medical school, they teach you that the slightest drop of alcohol can be very harmful to the intellectual development of the fetus, but in our time, you know... (*To Mabel*) I can tell you that your mother, when she was pregnant with you, didn't just drink water... (*To Steven*) I would have preferred her to be a dentist, like me, but what can I do... Anyway, accountant is good too...

Mabel – I've already told you a hundred times, chartered accountant.

Robert – By the way, Mabel, would you mind clearing the appetizers and giving your mother a hand in the kitchen? I need to talk a little man-to-man with my son-in-law...

Mabel, outraged, takes some glasses and heads towards the kitchen, under Steven's embarrassed gaze.

Robert – Tell me, I can't wait to see what the new assistant you're sending me looks like on Monday. Twenty-five years old... That'll be a change from mine... I won't be able to enjoy her for long, but well... What's this... Natacha like?

Steven – She does her job very well...

Robert – Physically, I mean!

Steven – Listen... Rather tall... Rather blonde...

Robert – Pretty?

Steven – Not bad...

Robert – But then why on earth do you want to get rid of her?

Steven – Let's just say... Newham was a bit far for her. She lives in Acton...

Robert – Ah, yes, of course... Actually, you'll see how funny it is, but you might just see her again sooner than you think, this... Natacha.

Steven – Really...?

Robert – That's what I wanted to talk to you about, Steven... Man to man!

Steven – You're intriguing me, Robert...

Robert – Well... As we just announced to you, in the spring, we will be permanently moving to Benidorm with Victoria... which of course means I'm retiring from the dental practice, do you follow me?

Steven – To Benidorm?

Robert – I've known you to be sharper than that, my dear Steven! Luckily, you didn't have a second port. No, I mean that I'll need a successor for the dental practice.

Steven – I see...

Robert – As you know, the dental practice is just across from this house. That allows my wife to keep an eye on me from her window... For you, obviously, when you live here, it would be more than convenient...

Steven – Obviously...

Robert – And here the neighbourhood is very wealthy ? It would be a change from Newham. Here, it is a very good business. You know that well, you're the one who handles my accounting! So, we're already a bit partners, aren't we?

Steven – If you say so...

Robert – Well, when I asked you for a little help with my accounting, I already had a little idea in mind, obviously...

Steven – Obviously...

Robert – So, what do you say?

Steven – Well, I'm not sure I can afford to start my own business yet... As you said, a dental practice like this, right in the centre of London, with such a clientele... It's worth its weight in gold. I don't know if my bank would accept...

Robert – Who's talking about a bank, my dear Steven! You're family, aren't you?

Steven – Well, yes, but...

Robert – You're not going to ask those vampires who will suck you dry with their 10% loans! No, we'll find a little arrangement that suits both of us. You pay me a little rent every month, that gives me a retirement supplement, and everything else will be used to pay for the heating oil bill, the property tax, and the local taxes of this huge house that will soon be yours! What do you say?

Steven – I... I don't know what to say...

Robert – Well, don't say anything and let yourself go... And then, in three months, you'll be back here with little Natacha... Trust me, I'll keep her on hold in the meantime. Because, these days, it is not easy to find competent staff, right?

Steven – Yeah... I'll have another port, after all.

Steven pours himself another glass of port and downs it in one gulp.

Robert – It's good, isn't it?

Steven – Yeah...

Robert – It's my assistant who brings it back from Portugal... You know, Maria... The one who's retiring... I'll miss her port too... Because, between you and me, spending winter in Benidorm with the missus, sipping tea... Well, you only live once... So? Happy, my little Steven?

Steven – Since we're among men, Robert, allow me to ask you a question.

Robert – Go ahead.

Steven – You and Victoria are such a close couple. What's your secret, both of you?

Robert – Ah, my little Steven... It touches me that you would ask me that... You're starting out in life... I was young too, you know... I'm not going to tell you that I've never breached the marriage contract. We're only human, after all... And with the job we do... We have temptations...

Steven – That's for sure...

Robert – With all those bored women waiting in our waiting room to lie down on our chair with their mouths open... and who are often only there for a good scaling... You know what I mean?

Steven – Yeah, well...

Robert – No, my little Steven. To make a couple last, you see, the important thing is not to remain faithful to your wife for your whole life. Nobody can be expected to do the impossible. What's important, if you cheat on her, is that she never finds out...

Steven – Ah...

Robert – And even more importantly, that the neighbours never find out. It's a matter of respect, you understand...

Mabel returns to set the table.

Robert – Oh, sweetheart, you're here... Well, I'm going to see what my wife is doing in the kitchen... I'll let you talk about that with Mabel? I mean, about my proposal, right? Not about my marital advice...

Mabel – What were you talking about, exactly?

Steven (*devastated*) – He wants me to take over his practice too...

Mabel – No...

Steven – You see, we can't lie to them anymore...

Mabel – Well, that takes the cake..! Everything for you, right?

Steven – Well... He thinks our relationship is at its best... What's mine is yours... You see, we have no choice...

Mabel – Oh no, certainly not! If we tell them we're getting a divorce, they're going to disinherit me but still leave you with the fully equipped dental practice... including the charming assistant!

Steven – But Mabel, I cheated on their daughter! Your father could understand, maybe...

Mabel – Oh really?

Steven – But not your mother!

Mabel – You think so...

Steven – Of course! (*Pause*) And then you're right, it could never work out between us...

Mabel – Oh, really? And why is that?

Steven – It's been three years since you started therapy, don't tell me you still haven't figured it out?

Mabel – Figured out what?

Steven – Your father is a dentist. You married a dentist. Your mother controls the purse strings, you're a chartered accountant. Don't tell me your therapist hasn't talked to you about the Oedipus complex.

Mabel – My therapist isn't one to speak a lot...

Steven – Listen, Mabel, you chose me so that I would please your parents. I did everything for that. And now you're blaming me for taking your place with them!

Mabel – And your affair with Natacha, was that also to please them...?

Steven – Alright, you win...

Mabel – So it's my fault then, is that it?

Steven – It's nobody's fault, Mabel... But I'm tired of playing the perfect son-in-law. No, I'm not perfect. And if you want to know the truth, your parents drive me crazy!

Mabel – Oh yeah? That's news to me...

Steven – Well it's not news, believe me! Do you think it's fun for me to drive across Paris twice a week to come have dinner with your parents? All that just to hear you badmouthing them for an hour on the way there and back? Two hours when there's traffic...

Mabel – You never told me that...

Steven – Well I'm telling you now! Your parents have always driven me crazy, Mabel. If I've done everything to please them, it's only to make you happy. Mother-in-law this, father-in-law that. But now that I'm going to lose you, I can tell you, Mabel. Your parents drive me crazy! With their ordinary racism, their wealth and their beef roast!

Victoria returns with a dish in her hands.

Victoria – Dinner's ready!

Steven – Yeah, fuck you, mother-in-law!

Victoria – What's gotten into you, my dear Steven...

Steven (*to Mabel*) – I'll let you break the news to them, I can't take it anymore, I'm going to smoke a cigarette.

Victoria – A cigarette? But you don't smoke!

Steven – Yes, I smoke, believe it or not. In secret. And even drugs, sometimes!

Steven leaves.

Victoria – But what's going on, Mabel? What did you do to him to put him in such a state?

Mabel – Steven and I are getting divorced, that's what's going on!

Victoria – Oh my god! Did you cheat on him? Is the child not his?

Mabel – He cheated on me!

Victoria – Ah, you scared me... But my dear, men are like that... They're not wired for monogamy, you have to know that... And right now...

Mabel – What, right now?

Victoria – You're pregnant, that's what. Which means you're not exactly operational... Who did he cheat on you with?

Mabel – His assistant...

Victoria – With his assistant? Well, that doesn't count, my dear! In the old days, the bourgeois in Kensington used to sleep with their maids to clear their heads and relax a bit. They had rooms upstairs for that. Now that we can't afford maids anymore... we call them assistants. But it amounts to the same thing.

Mabel – But that's monstrous! Don't tell me dad cheated on you too...?

Victoria – Listen, I chose his assistant for him...

Mabel – Maria?

Victoria – I was never very inclined towards... Well, not with your father, in any case... So at least with Maria, I knew who I was dealing with...

Mabel – Ah, I see... And you were sleeping with the gardener?

Victoria slaps her daughter, who is speechless. Robert returns.

Robert – Ah, so we can sit down to eat now... (*Mabel leaves*) Why did you slap her...?

Victoria – She just told me Steven is cheating on her.

Robert – And it's not true?

Victoria – It probably is... But you know what's worse?

Robert – What?

Victoria – He smokes!

Robert is also speechless.

Robert – Oh, for god's sake... And I just offered him to take over my practice...

Victoria – She wants a divorce...

Robert – Because he smokes?

Victoria – Because he cheated on her with his assistant!

Robert – Natacha?

Victoria – You know her?

Robert – No... I mean... You know that Maria is retiring at the end of the year...

Victoria – So what?

Robert – Steven offered me to take over Natacha.

Victoria – A second-hand, in other words. Like the Fiesta I sold on eBay a while ago.

Robert – I didn't know she was his mistress...

Victoria – That's right... So Maria is not enough for you now?

Robert – She's retiring!

Victoria – You're all the same... Listen to me, Robert. I knew you were cheating on me at the office with Maria. I hired her to have a little peace at home. But to cheat on Maria with that Natacha! I won't tolerate that!

Robert – But Victoria, what's gotten into you?

Victoria – Well, I'm fed up, you know! What if I asked for a divorce too?

Robert (*annoyed*) – Then I'll have to find another buyer for the dental practice, now...

Victoria – For what?

Robert – For the dental practice! Can't you smell the burnt smell?

Victoria – Oh, my God, my beef, I forgot about it!

Robert – It's going to be overcooked again... Like last year...

Blackout.

ACT 3

They are all four at the table, finishing dinner. The atmosphere is sinister.

Robert – Did you hear the joke about a woman who rushes into her gynecologist's practice and asks, "Excuse me, but did I leave my panties here?" "No, Madam, I'm sorry." "Oh, then it must be at my dentist's practice..."

No one laughs, of course, except for him.

Victoria – How did you find the roast beef?

Robert – Perhaps a little overcooked?

Steven – Charred would be a more appropriate term, mother-in-law. I think at this point we could even talk about incineration.

Victoria – Would you like some more champagne to finish the Yule log?

Steven – Yes, please.

Steven, who seems quite tipsy already, takes the champagne bottle and drinks from the neck. He might burp afterward.

Victoria – Is it cold enough?

Steven – It's lukewarm, as usual.

Robert – Oh, I should have put the bottle in the fridge before...

Victoria (*to Robert*) – You see? What did I tell you?

Steven – The Yule log, on the other hand, you should have taken it out of the freezer earlier.

Victoria – It's a frozen Yule log...

Steven – Oh, yes, but still... It's frozen solid. You could break a tooth on it.

Steven pulls out a joint and lights it with the candle stuck in the Yule log. Then he puts out the candle in the log, under the watchful eyes of Robert and Victoria.

Robert – Maybe we can move on to the gifts now?

Mabel (*coming back to reality*) – The gifts...?

Victoria (*looking at her daughter*) – I don't know if...

Robert – Come on, Mabel! Don't be childish. You're not seriously thinking about divorcing, are you? Sure, Steven made a little mistake, but it can happen to anyone.

Victoria – You know what you're talking about...

Robert – Anyway, you don't just get divorced like that, on a whim, for a simple mistake.

Mabel – A mistake?

Steven – You're losing it, poor Bobby...

Robert – Ah! Steven, you finally decided to call me Bobby

Victoria (*to Mabel*) – Listen, my little girl, I'm sorry for slapping you earlier. I got a little carried away, it's true. But you have to admit that you had pushed me to my limit...

Robert – It's true, Mabel, you have to admit that sometimes you go a little too far.

Mabel – I know, I'm a bit quirky.

Victoria – Ah, at least you admit it.

Steven – You know what I really would have loved to do in life?

Robert – What is it, my dear son-in-law?

Steven – Singer!

Victoria – Singer? Do you mean... like Frank Sinatra?

Steven (*sarcastic*) – No, like Julio Iglesias. (*He starts singing in Victoria's ear*)
When you are old, and I am gone, You'll look at me and wonder, Was I really there,
did I take the time, To tell you that you're all I have?

The three others listen to him, stunned.

Steven – But no, Bobby! Rock singer, of course!

Victoria – Oh yes... I also like Elvis Presley.

Steven (*with a sad look*) – Elvis Presley...

Robert – Well, I, for one, would have loved to play the drums.

Victoria – You? Play the drums? But why?

Robert – I don't know... It... It always appealed to me... You're surprised, aren't you?

Victoria – You never told me that.

Robert – Shows you that in a couple, we don't always tell each other everything...

Steven – Can you imagine, Bobby? We could have formed a band, you and me? We could have become rock and roll stars! And instead, we're dentists. It's enough to make you want to shoot yourself, isn't it?

Victoria – So, are we finally going to sign those papers?

Robert – Of course.

Steven – It's like signing your death warrant.

Robert – So, my dear Steven? Ready to defect to the West?

Robert stands up and fetches the paper. When he comes back, Steven also stands up, a little unsteadily. He takes the paper from Robert's hands and tears it up thoroughly.

Steven – I don't want your house! It smells like death!

Robert – Sorry?

Steven – Your dental practice too, with your clientele of old hags.

Robert – It's true that the clientele is a bit older, but well... It's actually better for business, you know! Prostheses, as I always say, that's where we make the most margin.

Steven – Your office stinks!

Robert – It's true that we have a little problem with the sewage system, but it can be fixed. And otherwise, you'll see, you get used to it...

Steven (*going from laughter to tears*) – The only thing I wanted from you was your daughter! If she leaves me, I'll lose the most precious thing in the world to me. (*Mabel seems touched by this statement.*) Forgive me, my darling. But if I cheated on you, it's because I felt like you had already left me... for those old fools.

Victoria – You wanted to leave him?

Robert – I think it's a metaphor...

Steven – Believe me, Mabel, the worst thing that could happen to us is to become like them.

Victoria – He's had a bit too much to drink, hasn't he?

Robert – Well, once in a while.

Victoria – It's not Christmas every day...

Steven – You know what? I didn't really know my parents. I always thought it was a tragedy. But since I've been with you, I've discovered what family life really is, and I'm starting to wonder if I wasn't lucky after all... (*Dead silence*) Here, I'm giving you back your keys...

Mabel – I'll meet you in the car, honey...

Steven places the keys on the table and walks out unsteadily. Mabel faces her parents.

Mabel – I always did everything to make you proud of me.

Robert – I know.

Mabel – Then why? Why have you never treated me like an adult?

Victoria – Maybe we were afraid of getting old...

Mabel – You know what hurts me the most today? It's not knowing that you're not proud of me. It's the certainty that I will never be proud of you again.

Robert – That must be what it means to become an adult...

Mabel leaves. Robert and Victoria remain alone together. The clock or cuckoo chimes eleven.

Robert – Eleven o'clock. We didn't even see the time pass...

Victoria – Do you want your herbal tea?

Robert – Peaceful night... Just the name arouse me already.

Victoria's gaze falls on the presents at the foot of the Christmas tree.

Victoria – With all this, we haven't even opened our gifts.

They approach the tree and look at the two packages.

Victoria (*reading*) – For Robert... This must be for you...

They each take their package and start to unwrap it.

Robert – A pair of slippers! Just like last year...

Victoria – Oh, yes! They look very warm...

Robert – And you?

Victoria opens her package and takes out something that looks a lot like a sex toy.

Victoria – What is this?

She presses a button and the device starts to vibrate.

Robert – An electric toothbrush...

Victoria – But where is the brush?

Robert doesn't have time to respond. Steven returns, stumbling, with Mabel, who is holding her stomach. Robert and Victoria look stunned.

Steven (*panicked*) – Do something, quickly! With all these emotions, she's gone into labor! And I have to admit that I'm not really in a condition to drive...

Steven collapses on the ground, while Mabel falls down onto the couch.

Mabel – Hurry, I'm about to...

Robert – I think it would be better to call the emergency services...

Victoria rushes to her phone.

Victoria – Oh my God! What do I tell them?

Robert – Premature birth and alcohol-induced coma? They'll give us a group rate...

Blackout.

Epilogue

Mabel arrives at the house with shopping bags. She turns around to talk to the person behind her, who is not yet visible.

Mabel – Are you changing, Robert? I think it's the big one.

Steven arrives with a baby in a portable bassinet.

Steven – I'm still struggling with that name... Do you really think it was a good idea to call him that?

Mabel – Robert will become trendy someday...

Steven – Yes... Like Mabel... Maybe in two hundred years...

Mabel – We owed it to them... In the end, we did inherit the house and the practice...

Steven – Yes...

Mabel – What a crazy idea to take a low-cost flight from Benidorm to London.

Steven – They knew this airline had a very bad reputation.

Mabel – Wasn't it in a plane crash with that low-cost carrier that you lost your parents?

Steven – Yes... (*He looks around the room*) It feels strange to know that this is our house now.

Mabel – Yes...

Steven – Do you really think it was a good idea to move here?

Mabel – It's right across from the practice...

Steven – Yes...

Mabel – And I think it would have hurt them to know we sold their house.

Steven – You can't just get rid of your family inheritance so easily...

Mabel – We can always repaint. Do you know a good painter?

Steven – I was thinking of something more radical.

Mabel – An exorcist?

They kiss, but their embrace is interrupted by the doorbell. Steven goes to answer it.

Steven – Mum-in-law! We thought we'd never see you again!

Robert and Victoria arrive, followed by Steven.

Victoria – Well no, my little Steven! You won't get rid of us that easily!

Robert – Hello, hello...

Mabel – So your flying coffin managed to take off after all?

Victoria kisses Mabel.

Robert – How's Robert Junior doing?

Mabel – Very well, very well... And how are you doing?

Victoria – The plane was a little late, but... We took a taxi.

Robert – Otherwise, we would have barely had time to come and see you...

Steven – In any case, you look great! Radiant! Retirement suits you! Right, Mabel? You look like a young couple in love!

Robert and Victoria seem a little embarrassed.

Steven – Is it good weather in Benidorm?

Robert and Victoria answer at the same time.

Robert – Splendid...

Victoria – It's raining...

Robert – Let's say... stormy weather with occasional sunny spells.

Mabel – Is everything going well there?

Steven – Are you not getting bored?

Victoria – Since we retired, we're so busy, each on our own... We don't even have time to argue anymore...

Robert – I ran into Natacha who was leaving the practice. So you kept her after all?

Mabel – It's temporary...

Embarrassed silence. Victoria leans over the portable bassinet.

Victoria – It's crazy how much he looks like his grandfather, doesn't he?

Mabel – At that age, he's still a little wrinkled...

Victoria – How much does he weigh?

Mabel – About 9 pounds

Victoria (*petting the baby*) – That would make a nice little roast, wouldn't it...

Steven – You're staying for dinner with us, of course...

Mabel – We've prepared the guest room for you.

Robert – Don't be silly! We're taking the plane again in three hours. We're just in transit!

Steven – These young retirees... Always on vacation, eh?

Mabel (*to Steven*) – Speaking of transit, we really need to change Robert...

Victoria – Wait, I'll do it! I need to take charge.

Steven – For senior Robert in a few years?

Mabel – Sit down, Mom, please...

Steven – Robert, you too... (*Referring to the grocery bags*) I'll leave these in the kitchen and offer you something to drink.

Steven leaves, followed by Mabel with the portable bassinet.

Robert and Victoria glance around nostalgically.

Robert – It feels strange to be here again, though...

Victoria – Yes...

Robert – Do you regret it?

Victoria – No. And you?

Robert – Me neither...

A pause.

Victoria – Do you have the papers?

Robert – Yes, yes... We just need to sign them...

Victoria – We'll have to tell them someday.

Robert – It'll be a shock for them.

Awkward silence.

Victoria – How's Maria doing?

Robert – She's doing okay.

Victoria – And how's Portugal?

Robert – Oh, you know, with one or two minimum wages, you can live like a king.

Victoria – And the language?

Robert – The language...?

Victoria – Portuguese!

Robert – Ah... Oh, you know, you add "o" and "a" at the end of each word.

Victoria – And you have an interpreter.

Robert – Yes... (*Pause*) I play in an orchestra...

Victoria – An orchestra, you?

Robert – A small folk group. I play the tambourine. It's not too complicated.

Victoria – Ah, yes, that's nice...

Robert – You'll have to come see us.

Victoria – Why not...

Robert – And you?

Victoria – I met someone.

Robert – Does he like walnut bread?

Victoria – And herbal tea.

Robert – Peaceful night...

New silence.

Victoria – I don't know how we're going to tell them.

Robert – Yes... It's going to be a shock for them.

Fade to black.

The End.

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez was first a drummer for several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then began a career writing television scripts before turning to theatre and writing plays. He has written close to a hundred scripts for television and as many plays, some of which have already become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). He is one of the most produced contemporary playwrights in France and in other francophone countries. Several of his plays are also available in Spanish and English, and are regularly produced in the United States and Latin America.

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

For those who prefer reading or working from books, printed versions of his plays can be purchased from Amazon for a price similar to that of photocopying this document.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

A Cuckoo's nest

A simple business dinner

An innocent little murder

Casket for two

Cheaters

Crisis and Punishment

Critical but stable

Four stars

Friday the 13th

Him and Her

Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall

New Year's Eve at the Morgue

Quarantine

Running on Empty

Strip Poker

The Ideal Son-in-Law

The Window across the courtyard

The Worst Village in England

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