

La Comédiathèque

# Preliminaries

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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# Preliminaries

**Jean-Pierre Martinez**

*Translation by the author*

A man and a woman encounter each other daily at a café, discreetly observing one another from separate tables, filled with curiosity but hesitant to initiate conversation. Will they yield to the longing for a rendezvous, uncertain if reality will match their mutual fantasies? While exploring the potential of deepening their connection, they also face the inevitable narrowing of options. Holding onto the preliminary stage of their interaction means risking missing out on what truly matters.

## **Characters**

Him

Her

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## Scene 1

*A man and a woman are sitting in a café, each at a separate table. Between them, slightly set back, is a third unoccupied table with some newspapers. Both the man and the woman have a notebook in front of them and occasionally scribble some notes. They both avoid making eye contact with each other but occasionally steal glances in each other's direction. The man stands up and addresses the audience while the woman remains seated, unchanged, and ignoring him.*

**Him** – Do you see that woman sitting at that table? She's here every morning. She arrives a little before me, or sometimes a little after. Around eight o'clock. She orders a coffee. She stays for about three-quarters of an hour. Always alone. She seems lost in her thoughts. From time to time, she writes something in her notebook. What? I don't know. This woman is a mystery. Every woman is a mystery until we speak to her and she answers us, if she agrees. A mystery, and therefore a promise. The promise of a journey. An adventure. A leap into the unknown. The thrill of that exhilarating but perilous encounter with the other... Of course, I could get up and go talk to her. But to be honest, it's not just shyness that holds me back. It's the fear of being rejected. You can always find an excuse to approach a stranger without immediately venturing onto the slippery slope of ordinary flirting...

*He takes a tiny object out of his pocket, approaches her, and shows her something in the palm of his hand.*

**Him** – Excuse me, miss... or madam, perhaps? I found an earring yesterday morning under the table you usually occupy. I was wondering if you might have lost it...?

*She gives him a offended look, quickly glances at the earring, shakes her head slightly with a disdainful expression, and goes back to her notebook. He addresses the audience again.*

**Him** – At worst, she would politely tell me that she hasn't lost anything like that, and that would be the end of it. I would know where I stand and keep my dignity. At best, if I'm not completely indifferent to her, she might take the opportunity to seize the lifeline I'm extending and start a conversation.

*He turns to her again, with his palm open. She takes the earring, examines it, before giving it back to him with a big smile.*

**Her** – No... Unfortunately, it's not mine. Too bad, it's very pretty... If you happen to find the other one... But please, have a seat... We cross paths every day, and we've never had a chance to talk...

*He moves away and turns to the audience again, while she goes back to her notebook, ignoring him once more.*

**Him** – No, what holds me back from approaching her is not the fear of getting a cold shoulder. Connection failure, as it said today. No, it's more like... the fear of being disappointed. Well, I'm sure this charming young woman's conversation is absolutely

fascinating, but... once I find out exactly who she is, what her name is, what she does for a living, whether she's married or not, and above all what she writes in her little notebook... Well, there you have it... Suddenly, she won't be the mysterious stranger in the café anymore, the object of all fantasies and bearer of all promises. She'll be Louise, an elementary school teacher, divorced, and mother of a three-year-old boy, writing evaluations for her next parent-teacher conference... Or Justine, an actress, single, jotting down ideas that come to her for the one-woman show she has been dreaming of writing for years, which would finally make her famous. Or Marina, a Romanian who recently arrived in France to marry an old pharmacist, and who, to distract herself from boredom, still reluctant to cheat on her husband, puts her desires on paper before choosing whom to sleep with to fulfil them. Yes. For now, she is all these women, and many more besides. She is every woman. But once we introduce ourselves, she will be just one woman, who will already make me regret all the women she will never be.

*He takes a newspaper from the middle table, goes back to his seat, and starts flipping through it. She glances at him discreetly, then gets up and addresses the audience.*

**Her** – I wonder who this guy could be... I can tell he's looking at me from below when he thinks I don't see him. He must be shy. We've been crossing paths here every day for months, and he has never dared to speak to me. Unless I don't interest him, plain and simple... Maybe I'm not good enough for him, that's it. Who does he think he is? He's not that sexy either. And if he had more important things to do in life, he definitely wouldn't spend so much time in this café every morning. What is he looking at in that newspaper? His horoscope? Job offers? Yes, he seems rather idle. Maybe he's unemployed... Idle but not exactly desperate. Always a faint ironic smile at the corner of his lips. A hint of superiority. Like... I don't say anything, but I think otherwise. I don't know what he could be writing in his notebook with that inspired look. Probably his deepest thoughts... I would be curious to see that... Earlier, I thought he was going to get up and say something to me. But no, he chickened out again. Or maybe he's a writer. Taking notes for his next novel. Perhaps his heroine will be a bit like me. That's it. He prefers to keep our story virtual. I don't know what he can imagine when he looks at me...

*She takes a pocket mirror out of her bag and looks at herself for a moment.*

**Her** – If I met myself in a café, what would I imagine? (*She puts away her mirror*) I don't know... Do I really look like who I am? Do I have the slightest chance of passing for someone else? If he comes up to me, I've got a good mind to lie to him. To invent another life for myself. Just to see if I could deceive him. It's true, when a stranger approaches you, by definition, you know nothing about him. He could be anyone, and tell you anything. But he doesn't know anything about you either. For a few moments at least, before being shamelessly unmasked, you have the freedom to choose who you will be that day. With the wild hope of gradually becoming who you've decided to be. Another life... Yes, but which one? To make this work, I would need to improve my character. Invent a name. A profession. An age too. I wouldn't mind looking a bit younger, just for the fun. Not too much though, it has to remain

believable, but just for pleasure. Two or three years. Come on, five, that'll do. What about a foreign accent? No, that would be too difficult to maintain over time. Besides, I can be a foreigner and speak French perfectly. Alright, but for me to bring this new existence to life, he would first have to decide to talk to me. What if I smiled at him? That might encourage him. At the same time, I can't see myself looking him straight in the eye and smiling stupidly. Who does he think I am? Or maybe, I approach him. I can always find an excuse. I don't know...

*She discreetly takes off her earrings, puts one in her bag, and keeps the other in her palm. Then she looks under the table as if searching for something. Finally, she stands up and walks towards him. He puts down his newspaper and watches her approach, a bit puzzled.*

**Her** – Excuse me, I lost an earring like this one yesterday. I cared about it a lot. It was a gift from... Well, I cared about it a lot. You didn't happen to find it, did you?

**Him** – An earring...? I... No, I haven't found anything... I'm really sorry, but...

**Her** – But?

**Him** – No, no, nothing, I... No, I didn't see anything.

**Her** – Well, thank you.

*She returns to her seat and addresses the audience.*

**Her** – Can you imagine if I make an approach like that, and he responds with such a silly look... A writer, you bet... Honestly, I'd rather not risk of a banal encounter and hold onto my illusions a bit longer. Well, at the same time, maybe he's not as dumb as he seems. I mean, I caught him off guard. Men are so used to being the ones who make the first move... When we take the initiative, they panic. They're paralysed... Did you see that? As soon as I laid my eyes on him... He looked like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car, and he was already thinking about going to the pot once he got home. Poor thing... I scared him, that's it. I hope I didn't traumatize him, at least... It's true that this earring story... it's a bit far-fetched. I'll try to come up with something better for tomorrow...

*She starts scribbling in her notebook again. He goes back to reading his newspaper.*

**Blackout**

## Scene 2

*She is the one reading the newspaper, and he is the one scribbling in his notebook. He stops and looks at her for a moment. Then he addresses the audience again.*

**Him** – Every day I tell myself that this time, I absolutely have to talk to her. And yet, here I am. Postponing it until tomorrow. I make the pleasure last. Platonic love is nice, but being in love with a stranger is even better, isn't it? It's the certainty of never being disappointed, at least. The problem with love is that we often project onto them an image that isn't truly their own. And then we blame them for not living up to that ideal. With a woman we don't know, at least we can keep dreaming. To mistake reality for our desires. Yes, undoubtedly, the ideal woman is the one we haven't met yet. I see her enter this café every morning. Or perhaps she's already here if I'm a bit late. It lasts for a little while, and then she leaves. She has no existence for me outside this here and now. It's a bit like theatre. I choose the role she will play that day based on my current mood. And when she leaves the stage, having played a different character each time, she returns to nothingness. Any actor is smaller than the smallest character they have to interpret. The costume is always too big, and the stage is the only place where it doesn't show too much. So I wait... I constantly postpone the moment of breaking the spell, of getting to know her. Yes... but what if she's not here tomorrow? Or the day after? And if she never sets foot in this café again? After having been all women, she'd be none forever. Just a vague memory that gradually fades away. Do you know that wonderful song by Georges Brassens, "Les Passantes"... All those beautiful passers-by whom we couldn't hold back. No, I won't let this one pass. Too bad, I'm taking the plunge. Without a safety net. I'm stepping onto the stage too, except I haven't learned any lines. I have no idea what I'm going to say to her. That way, at least it will seem more natural. More sincere. My clumsiness might work in my favour. No, because this earring business... It's better to improvise. Anyway, no matter what I say, if I don't interest her, she'll make it clear. And if I do interest her...

*He approaches her. She looks up when she sees him coming, but her face remains impassive.*

**Him** – Excuse me, I...

**Her** – Yes...?

**Him** – I see you sitting there in front of me every day, and I was thinking that...

**Her** – What...?

**Him** – Well, maybe we could... get to know each other.

**Her** – Get to know each other?

**Him** – I'm sorry, I can see that I'm bothering you. It was really stupid of me. Excuse me, I'll leave you alone...

**Her** (*firmly*) – Sit down.

*He sits down.*

**Her** – My name is Eve, and yours?

**Him** – Uh... Adam.

**Her** – Alright... Adam and Eve, then.

**Him** – Uh... Yes...

**Her** – And what do you do for a living, Adam?

**Him** – I'm... a writer.

**Her** – Oh, really?

**Him** – Does that surprise you?

**Her** – That's precisely what I had imagined. That's what surprises me.

**Him** – So, you had already imagined something...

**Her** – Don't get carried away too quickly, though...

**Him** – Do I really look like a writer?

**Her** – I don't know. Maybe. And I see you always writing things in that little notebook.

**Him** – Alright, but... you also take notes in a notebook. Don't tell me you're a writer too?

**Her** – Well, yes!

**Him** – Really?

**Her** – Why not?

**Him** – Of course... Novels?

**Her** – More like plays, actually. And you?

**Him** – Short stories.

**Her** – I see...

**Him** – I know what you're thinking.

**Her** – What?

**Him** – He writes short stories because he's not capable of writing a whole novel.

**Her** – Not at all! And you could say the same thing about me.

**Him** – Oh yeah?

**Her** – She writes plays because she's incapable of writing a novel.

**Him** – That's true...

**Her** – Actually, I don't really write plays.

**Him** – Oh no?

**Her** – More like sketches.

**Him** – Sketches are to theatre what short stories are to novels.

**Her** – Yes... A subgenre... *(Pause)* Are you really a writer?

**Him** – Maybe not. And you?

**Her** – Neither am I.

**Him** – So you lied to me.

**Her** – You started it, didn't you?

**Him** – Yes... but you didn't know that.

**Her** – Why a writer?

**Him** – I don't know... I guess I was afraid of disappointing you.

**Her** – We don't even know each other yet, and you're already afraid of disappointing me. I think you lack a bit of self-confidence, Adam.

**Him** – Or maybe I tend to overestimate people I don't know.

**Her** – That's kind of you...

**Him** – I'm sorry, that's not exactly what I meant... Well... not exactly.

**Her** – And what do you do for a living that's so shameful that you feel the need to invent another job for yourself? Are you a tax inspector?

**Him** – No.

**Her** – Do you do telemarketing?

**Him** – No, not that either.

**Her** – Do you work at a funeral service company?

**Him** – Definitely not.

**Her** – But you're not really proud of what you do.

**Him** – No. And you?

**Her** – Me neither.

**Him** – Well... maybe we should keep our part of mystery.

**Her** – I think that's preferable.



**Him** – What if we stick with being writers?

**Her** – Alright.

**Him** – I might as well say that I write 600-page novels, and you write three-hour plays without an intermission.

**Her** – If you're going to lie, why start by belittling yourself...

*A pause.*

**Him** – So, I'm a novelist.

**Her** – And I'm a playwright.

**Him** – And are you married?

**Her** – Now that's not like the job, it's a closed question, as they say in polling institutes. You're either married or you're not.

**Him** – You can always lie about the answer...

**Her** – Yes... but it leaves little room for imagination.

**Him** – Still... an affair is always more romantic.

**Her** – That's true.

**Him** – Besides, the answer isn't necessarily binary... You could also be divorced. Or widowed...

**Her** – Widowed...

**Him** – Why not?

**Her** – Yes...

**Him** – Are you a widow?

**Her** – I am a widow.

**Him** – I'm truly sorry.

**Her** – You couldn't have known. And it's not your fault, is it? It wasn't you who murdered my husband.

**Him** – Oh, so he was murdered?

**Her** – Did I say that?

**Him** – You said, "It wasn't you who murdered him."

**Her** – I only meant to say that you weren't responsible for his death.

**Him** – So your husband wasn't murdered.

**Her** – No, he died in a much more ordinary way. Almost stupidly, if I may say so...

**Him** – Dying is always a bit stupid.

**Her** – Oh yes, but in this case...

**Him** – I don't want to be nosy, but I must say you've piqued my curiosity a bit.

**Her** – It happened during our honeymoon in the Maldives.

**Him** – You're right, it starts off in a very ordinary way. Like a cheesy romance novel. I hope it gets better afterwards...

**Her** – May I continue?

**Him** – Please...

**Her** – We had spent the afternoon on a paradise beach, in glorious sunshine. We were about to head back to the hotel when suddenly, the weather turned stormy... Paul...

**Him** – His name was Paul?

**Her** – Yes, why?

**Him** – No, no reason...

**Her** – Would you have preferred a different name for him? Steven, perhaps? Or Kevin?

**Him** – Paul is just fine. So, the weather turned stormy...

**Her** – The wind started blowing very hard. Paul grabbed the handle of the umbrella, which the storm was about to carry away, and it was at that precise moment that...

*Her hesitates, overcome by emotion.*

**Him** – Yes?

**Her** – A bolt of lightning struck him...

**Him** – No? An alien attack...

**Her** – I told you it was a very ordinary death.

**Him** – Oh yes, sorry... I always tend to...

**Her** – The umbrella attracted that lightning, like a lightning rod. Paul died instantly...

**Him** – Ah, shit.

**Her** – In the end, I have been married only for a week...

**Him** – If it were a cheesy romance novel, it could have titled it "Lovestruck in the Maldives"...

**Her** – But cheesy romance novels always have a happy ending... I never got over Jean-Louis's death...

*She seems on the verge of tears. He seems hesitant.*

**Him** – But... is it true?

*She suddenly becomes impassive again.*

**Her** – What do you think?

**Him** – I don't know... It's just so...

**Her** – Stupid? I told you, it was a stupid death.

**Him** – Well, the main thing is that now you're free.

**Her** – And you?

**Him** – Me?

**Her** – Are you free?

**Him** – Yes... Well... I'm married, but I'm free.

**Her** – Now you've intrigued me...

**Him** – It's very simple, you'll see.

**Her** – I'm listening.

**Him** – Well, here it is... I'm free, but my wife isn't.

**Her** – Your wife isn't free.

**Him** – She's in prison.

**Her** – Alright...

**Him** – So she's not free, but I...

**Her** – Yes, I understood, but... how long is she in prison for?

**Him** – If all goes well, ten years.

**Her** – If all goes well?

**Him** – With the reduced sentence... for good behaviour.

**Her** – I don't want to pry, but... what did she do to end up in prison?

**Him** – Attempted homicide.

**Her** – I see...

**Him** – She tried to kill me.

**Her** – Alright...

**Him** – Luckily for her... and incidentally for me, I survived.

**Her** – And how did she try to kill you...?

**Him** – Oh, in a very ordinary way... With a revolver.

**Her** – And so, she missed you.

**Him** – It didn't exactly happen like that.

**Her** – Tell me about it...

**Him** – I was already a bit suspicious... I searched through her things and found the gun she was hiding in her handbag.

**Her** – And you took it from her.

**Him** – No.

**Her** – And why not?

**Him** – That would have made her suspicious. And she could have used another method to kill me, like... I don't know, poison.

**Her** – Yes, poison is much more feminine.

**Him** – So, to avoid arousing her suspicions, I preferred to replace the bullets in the revolver with blanks. That way, I kept control of the situation without arousing her suspicions...

**Her** – Very clever...

**Him** – Yes... Except that... I don't know how I managed it. I must have mixed things up a bit... I did replace the first five bullets, but the sixth...

**Her** – The sixth?

**Him** – It went into my shoulder.

**Her** – Oh dear...

**Him** – She wasn't supposed to empty the entire magazine on me either... Well, I was lucky...

**Her** – You call that luck...?

**Him** – A bullet in the shoulder is still better than a bullet in the heart...

**Her** – Women are often very clumsy with firearms. That's why poison... But if I may ask, what could you have possibly done to this poor woman that made her want to empty a full magazine on you?

**Him** – That's also a very ordinary story... a bit like yours...

**Her** – Oh no, don't be too modest... I admit I'm way outclassed... So, what happened?

**Him** – I was cheating on her, plain and simple.

**Her** – You were cheating on her... And with whom?

**Him** – A stranger I met in a café... This café, actually. It's strange, she always used to sit at the same place that you're sitting in now.

**Her** – But not at the same time, I imagine.

**Him** – No, she used to come in the late afternoon, around five or six o'clock...

**Her** – And when is she getting out of prison...

**Him** – My wife?

**Her** – Yes, your wife.

**Him** – Well... I hope she will have forgiven me for my infidelity. Just as I forgive her for trying to kill me.

**Her** – So, as long as she stays locked up, you're free...

**Him** – That's right.

**Her** – Well, why not? That still leaves us with about ten years...

**Him** – Maybe even a bit more... If she doesn't have exemplary behaviour...

*A pause.*

**Her** – And you say you're not a writer.

**Him** – Who knows... I must have lied. When I said I was, or when I implied that I might not be. What do you think?

**Her** – I think if you're not a writer, you should consider becoming one...

**Him** – Thank you. And what about you?

**Her** – Me?

**Him** – Are you really a playwright?

*She looks at her watch.*

**Her** – I'm sorry, I have to go.

**Him** – Of course. It's the time you usually leave.

**Her** – Yes...

**Him** – To go where? Mystery...

*She stands up.*

**Her** – See you tomorrow... maybe.

**Him** – Perhaps...

**Her** – As long as you have a good story to tell me, I'll never miss one of our meetings.....

**Him** – That reminds me of another story...

**Her** – Ours could be called "One Thousand and One Mornings."

**Him** – But I couldn't see myself in the role of Scheherazade...

**Her** – If you prefer being the sultan, we can switch roles from time to time.

**Him** – Well... we're going to need a lot of imagination then.

**Her** – I'm sure you still have many other stories in your little notebook.

**Him** – And you in yours.

*She exits. He watches her leave. Then he turns towards the audience.*

**Him** – Excuse me, but... I have to get back to it.

*He sits back down, reflects, and starts scribbling something in his notebook.*

**Blackout.**

### Scene 3

*He is still sitting at his table, busy taking notes in his notebook. She enters.*

**Her** – Adam?

*He looks up, recognises her, and smiles.*

**Him** – Hello!

*She takes out a gun from her bag and points it at him. The man's smile freezes.*

**Her** – Did you think you could get away with this?

**Him** – What on earth...?

**Her** – Is she the one you had a rendezvous with?

**Him** – Her?

**Her** – Eve, isn't that her name?

**Him** – No, not at all! I don't know any Eve, I assure you...

**Her** – Of course... But this time, you won't get away with just a bullet in the shoulder, I guarantee it.

**Him** – Please, darling, don't do anything foolish!

**Her** – This one is loaded, believe me, and not with blanks!

**Him** – But come on... You were sentenced to ten years! Have they already released you?

**Her** – I escaped.

**Him** – Escaped? How?

**Her** – I carved a revolver out of bread crumbs, dried it, and coated it with shoe polish.

**Him** – A revolver made of bread crumbs?

**Her** – Exactly.

**Him** – And... is this the one?

*She hesitates for a moment.*

**Her** – Yes...

*She lowers her weapon, places it on the table, and sits down. He takes the gun and examines it.*

**Him** – Bravo, it's well done...

**Her** – I took a guard hostage, they didn't suspect a thing... Where is she?

**Him** – Who?

**Her** – Don't play dumb with me! That bitch you're cheating on me with...

**Him** – I don't know... She didn't come today...

**Her** – She must have suspected something.

**Him** – Yes, maybe...

**Her** – Too bad, I could have killed both of you in one shot.

**Him** – With a gun made of breadcrumbs?

**Her** – But what does she have that I don't? At least, tell me...

**Him** – I don't know her.

**Her** – What?

**Him** – What she has more than you is that I don't know her.

**Her** – She's your mistress, but you don't know her?

**Him** – We meet here every day. Every time we meet, she gives me a different name. She invents a character for herself. She has even pretended to be you...

**Her** – But you still fuck her, right?

**Him** – Fucking her, as you put it... that would already be knowing her a bit too much.

**Her** – Don't try to confuse me. Is she your mistress or not?

**Him** – I don't know... Yes, I suppose... We can put it that way.

**Her** – Poor Adam... Why bother making up such stories? When all of this is so banal...

**Him** – You're right... No matter how hard you try... Even when we're lying, everything we say is so far below what we'd like to be able to express. Words are always disappointing, that's why, as a general rule, it's better not to talk to anyone.

**Her** – I don't understand a word you're saying... You worry me, Adam. I wonder if you're not the one who should be locked up.

**Him** – Yes, maybe...

*She stands up.*

**Her** – In any case, if you see her, tell her that I'm looking for her. And even though my gun is made of breadcrumbs, this time, is loaded with real bullets.

**Him** – Where are you going?

**Her** – I remind you that I'm on the run. I can't stay here.

**Him** – Is there anything I can do?



**Her** – Have you got any money on you?

**Him** – Yes...

**Her** – Give it to me.

*He searches his pockets and hands her a few bills.*

**Him** – That's all I have...

**Her** – Don't worry, I'll give them back to you.

**Him** – It's not about the money that I'm worried... Will we see each other again?

**Her** – Who knows... In ten years, maybe... Or a bit more, because at the moment, getting a reprieve for good behaviour is not guaranteed.

**Him** – I will come to visit you, I promise.

**Her** – In the visiting room?

**Him** – When you talk to someone, it's always a bit like being in a visiting room, right? We talk, we lie, we pretend to understand each other, we pretend to believe each other, and when we're done talking, each one returns to their inner prison...

**Her** – It's still better than sharing the same cell and having only one person to talk to.

**Him** – You're right... In the end, prison is a bit like marriage.

**Her** – And there, it's often a life sentence. Even with good behaviour.

**Him** – Especially with good behaviour.

**Her** – Yes... People do get married in prison, but strangely enough, it's never with their cellmate.

**Him** – Ten years... Use that time to write a novel...

**Her** – What kind of novel can you write in prison?

**Him** – A novel about freedom, I imagine.

**Her** – Right, I'll think about it.

*He watches her leave. She exits. He examines the gun on the table, then addresses the audience.*

**Him** – I did rather well, didn't I?

**Blackout.**

## Scene 4

*She is sitting at her table, scribbling in her notebook. He enters and approaches her.*

**Him** – Excuse me... You are Paul's wife...? I mean... his widow.

*She looks up at him.*

**Her** – Who are you?

**Him** – Unfortunately, I cannot tell you my name. All you need to know is that I was one of your husband's colleagues..

**Her** – My husband worked at the Central Post Office in London.

**Him** – Yes, that's indeed where we were both supposed to work.

**Her** – Supposed to?

**Him** – It was a cover.

**Her** – A cover? So my husband...

**Him** – I can't tell you anything more specific. I just wanted you to know that your husband didn't die as stupidly as you think.

**Her** – Didn't he?

**Him** – No.

**Her** – In any case, it's very kind of you to try to convince me otherwise.

**Him** – Madam, your husband died for country.

**Her** – My husband was struck by lightning while trying to fold an umbrella to prevent it from being carried away by the wind.

**Him** – That's indeed the official version.

**Her** – Are you suggesting there could be another version?

**Him** – Paul was indeed struck by lightning, but not because of a thunderstorm.

**Her** – I'm listening...

**Him** – He was hit by a laser beam from a high-altitude fighter jet.

**Her** – A fighter jet?

**Him** – A jet belonging to a foreign power.

**Her** – But why would a foreign power want to eliminate my husband?

**Him** – Because he was a special agent, like me.

**Her** – A secret agent, you mean? Like James Bond...

**Him** – If you like, yes...

**Her** – And here I thought I was the widow of a petty civil servant.

**Him** – Believe me, dear lady, your husband was not just an ordinary employee at the Central Post Office. He died on a mission, like a hero, defending his country.

**Her** – On a beach in the Maldives?

**Him** – Great Britain has enemies everywhere. Even in the Maldives.

**Her** – And why are you telling me all this now?

**Him** – To honour his memory... and to ease your grief a little, which I know is immense. Your husband didn't fall victim to a stupid accident. He fell in the line of duty. And if he didn't receive a posthumous decoration... or rather, if he didn't have a national funeral, it was to preserve his anonymity... and to protect you as well.

**Her** – Do you think I'm in danger?

**Him** – I can't tell you anything more. But if it eases your mind, know that you are under permanent police protection, very discreet but very effective.

**Her** – That's quite reassuring, indeed.

**Him** – I must leave now.

**Her** – Will I see you again?

**Him** – Don't worry. Even if you can't see me, I'll never be far from you, ready to intervene at the slightest danger. I'll be your guardian angel, so to speak.

**Her** – Thank you.

**Him** – Have a good day, dear lady.

*He walks away and sits at his table, acting as if nothing happened. She observes him for a moment, intrigued, before immersing herself in her notebook.*

**Blackout.**

## Scene 5

*He arrives, looks for her but doesn't see her.*

**Him** – And there you go... She is not here... I don't have her phone number, and I don't even know her real name... Not Eve, anyway. Nor Scheherazade. (*Addressing the audience*) I suppose no one here knows her either, right? So many people come and go in cafés. Even if I had to describe her, I wouldn't know what to say exactly... She has beautiful eyes... A lovely smile... A unique way of walking... Running her hand through her hair... And she leaves a mysterious perfume in her wake... It's a bit thin for a sketch. I'm not sure a private detective would get very far with that... I'm going mad. What am I saying? I'm not going to hire a detective to track down a stranger I met in a café... or go to the police to report the worrying disappearance of a table neighbour I don't even know. Or maybe she comes at a different time... Her schedule was changed, and she starts working a little later. It's crazy. How can someone you don't even know be missed so much? Whereas most people you know, when they go away for a few days, you feel like you're the one going on holiday. Well... If I don't see her again, or if she only comes once in a while, I'll have to find a replacement for her. At least part-time. A temp, so to speak. After all, her or someone else. Since I don't know her, I shouldn't have too much trouble finding a stand-in.

*He scans the room, stopping on a woman located towards the back so that it's not clear exactly who he's talking to.*

**Him** – Well, she's not too bad... Can't really say she looks much like her, but... Yes, she could do... Do you mind, madam, if I fantasise a bit about you from afar? No, but don't worry... You too, sir... I'll never speak to you again. I'd be too afraid you wouldn't live up to my expectations. And vice versa, actually. No, our relationship will remain completely platonic. What shall I say? Totally virtual. Never a lingering gaze, let alone an inappropriate one. Respect for safe distances. Social distancing. Mandatory muzzle wearing... You won't even realise you have a secret admirer. Is that okay? Fine, then I'll go sit over there and continue to watch you discreetly out of the corner of my eye, imagining things... and when you're no longer here, I'll think of you from time to time.

*He sits down and takes out his notebook, jotting down a few notes. From time to time, he glances at the woman with a more or less steady gaze.*

**Blackout.**

## Scene 6

*She enters and looks around, searching for him.*

**Her** – I didn't come yesterday, to avoid him starting to consider our chance encounters, as regular as they may be, as a daily rendezvous. To keep alive in him that delicious, painful feeling of lack, and therefore of dependence... But today, he's the one who's not there... He must be tired of this purely imaginary affair. (*Looking towards the back of the room, in the direction of the woman to whom he spoke earlier*) Or maybe he has met someone else, who in the extreme poverty of his reality, at least allows him to satisfy his most mediocre desires. Too bad. I was starting to get attached, but well... Can you really build a romantic relationship while actively avoiding getting to know each other? Even when we lie, we still reveal a little of ourselves. In the end, the character we invent is even more revealing than who we truly are. He must have been scared. Or maybe he's on vacation, plain and simple. Perhaps he's sick. Or even dead. After all, he doesn't owe me any explanations. And neither do I. We are a free couple. We don't even know each other! Oh well, I'll come back tomorrow...

*She is about to leave but notices a notebook on the table he usually occupies.*

**Her** – Oh, he forgot his notebook. (*She seems to hesitate*) What should I do? Should I take it? And I'll return it when I see him. Or should I leave it there, so he can find it himself more easily? I'll leave it... (*She is about to leave*) But I could take a quick look... No, that wouldn't be right, it would be very intrusive. It might be his diary or something like that... Yes, but if someone else finds it instead of me and takes it... (*She grabs the notebook*) I'll take it anyway... I'm sure his notebook means a lot to him.. But I promise, I'll resist the urge to read it...

*She walks away.*

**Blackout.**

## Scene 7

*She is sitting at her usual table, scribbling in her notebook. He arrives and walks towards her.*

**Him** – Hello... I had to be away for a few days. I hope you didn't miss me too much...

*She feigns surprise.*

**Her** – Oh, really...? Well, don't worry, I wasn't here either...

**Him** – Well, anyway, I'm glad to see you again.

**Her** – Yes...

*Slight awkwardness.*

**Him** – Excuse me, I'll let you work...

**Her** – No, no, I'm not working... Well, I am, but... it's hard for me to consider it as work...

**Him** – Writing...

**Her** – Yes...

**Him** – Inspiration...

**Her** – If only we knew where to find it... we wouldn't waste so much time searching for it elsewhere.

**Him** – Inspiration is like lightning. You never know where and when it will strike you... Sorry, I didn't mean to bring up painful memories...

**Her** – So you've run out of inspiration?

**Him** – For now, it's actually you who inspire me.

**Her** – You know nothing about me.

**Him** – Exactly, I can imagine anything. An unknown person is like a blank page.

**Her** – A story yet to be written... (*Slightly embarrassed*) By the way... I found this.

*She hands him the notebook.*

**Him** – Oh yes...

**Her** – It's yours, isn't it?

**Him** – Did you open it?

**Her** – No! Who do you think I am?

**Him** – Sorry...

*He takes the notebook.*

**Her** – I opened it...

**Him** – Of course...

**Her** – Are you angry with me?

**Him** – How can one resist temptation? It's a bit like the story of Eve and the lost paradise. We would damn ourselves to know.

**Her** – And when we know, we're always a little disappointed.

**Him** – We realise that by choosing knowledge, you've given up on the marvels of the unknown.

**Her** – Yes... But the apple can also be a trap.

**Him** – So, you would be Snow White.

**Him** – And if you'd left this notebook there, on purpose, so that I'd find it...

**Him** – That's a possibility...

**Her** – So, what's written in this notebook could be yet another illusion. An invention to conceal your own reality. If you have one...

**Him** – In any case, we're no longer on equal footing. You know what's in my notebook, I don't know what's in yours.

**Her** – That's true. *(She hands him her notebook)* Here...

*He takes the notebook.*

**Him** – You could have made everything up as well.

**Her** – In that case, we would be on equal footing again.

*He opens the notebook, glances at it, then looks at her with an enigmatic smile.*

**Blackout.**

## Scene 8

*He is sitting at his table. He is writing in his notebook. She arrives and speaks to him.*

**Her** – So, how's the novel coming along?

**Him** – It's almost finished... All that's missing is the title...

**Her** – That's sometimes the hardest part.

**Him** – Yes... A bit like choosing a name for a child.

**Her** – But with the novel you've written, you already know it's about. You just need to find a title that suits it. With a child, you have to choose a name even though you don't know them yet.

**Him** – At the risk of projecting an image onto them that won't match.

**Her** – Maybe we should let children choose their own names.

**Him** – Yes... But at what age?

**Her** – I don't know.

**Him** – Or maybe we should be able to change our names several times during our lives.

**Her** – Above all, we should have the right to change our lives several times in the course of our lives... So, what's this novel about?

**Him** – It's the story of a man who encounters a beautiful stranger in a café every day. He would like to approach her, but...

**Her** – If he speaks to her, she will lose all her mystery, and therefore much of her charm...

**Him** – On the other hand... if he doesn't approach her, he will miss out on a beautiful story, and he will lose her forever.

**Her** – So he hesitates... And what's her name? Your beautiful stranger...

**Him** – Like with the title, I haven't given her a name yet... And what about your play?

**Her** – It's still too early to talk about it...

**Him** – I see... Have you read the newspaper?

**Her** – Not yet... Any interesting news?

**Him** – As an author, I'm mostly interested in the news stories... It's usually in that section that Humanity reveals its worst, and more rarely its best.

**Her** – Small stories are often more interesting than History with a capital 'H'.



**Him** – The newspaper is to the café what the Bible is to the church. In fact, the Bible probably started out as a collection of miscellaneous facts that were gradually transformed and embellished to make up myths.

**Her** – So? Was the fishing good this morning?

*He takes a newspaper from the table and shows her an article.*

**Him** – Here, at random... a woman, imprisoned for attempting to murder her husband, escapes by threatening her guards with a fake gun...

**Her** – Ah yes... A good writer could turn that into a novel.

**Him** – Or a play.

*She takes the newspaper and shows him another article.*

**Her** – Here's another one that might interest you: the peaceful employee of the Central Post Office was in fact a secret agent.

**Him** – Reality often surpasses fiction.

**Her** – I won't distract you any longer from your writing... I wouldn't want your readers to be deprived of a masterpiece because of me.

*She goes to sit down. They both start writing in their notebooks.*

***Blackout.***

## Scene 9

*She is sitting at her table. He approaches and hands her a book.*

**Him** – Here, it's for you...

**Her** – What is it?

**Him** – My first novel.

*She takes the book and looks at the cover.*

**Her** – You finally found the title.

**Him** – What do you think of it?

**Her** – "Preliminaries"... It's an exciting title...

**Him** – It's the story of an encounter.

**Her** – Every encounter has the same rhythm as an act of love.

**Him** – There are the preliminaries, during which we imagine and explore in silence...

**Her** – As long as possible.

**Him** – Then comes that brief moment when we finally engage in conversation to enter the intimacy of the other person.

**Her** – Followed by that endless moment of fulfilment and boredom, tinged with a slight disappointment that we try to conceal with insignificant chatter...

**Him** – Waiting for desire to explore the unknown to return with forgetting.

**Her** – And this time, may the preliminaries last an eternity... Thank you for the book.

**Him** – It's partly thanks to you that I wrote it.

**Her** – Does it talk about me?

**Him** – About you... About us...

**Her** – Us?

**Him** – Mostly about me. And you, how's the play coming along?

**Her** – It's finished.

**Him** – Could I see it...?

**Her** – I don't think so, no.

**Him** – Why not?

**Her** – Because we just performed it.

*They smile at each other. **Blackout.***

## Scene 10

*The man and the woman are sitting together at the same table in the centre, with a few newspapers still on it. They have coffee, not speaking to each other or making eye contact. They each pick up a newspaper and flip through it. He puts his down first and stares at someone at the back of the room.*

**Him** – Have you noticed that girl over there?

*She puts her newspaper down and looks in the same direction.*

**Her** – Which girl?

**Him** – She's always here at the café at the same time as us. Exactly at the same hour. Always sitting at the same table.

**Her** – So what?

**Him** – Nothing... I wonder who she might be...

**Her** – What do you mean, who she might be...?

**Him** – I don't know... What her name is... What she does for a living...

**Her** – Just go ask her.

**Him** – I don't know what she might be writing in her little notebook.

**Her** – It could be a shopping list...

**Him** – Yes, that's possible.

**Her** – Cotton swabs, disposable tissues, toilet paper, sanitary pads...

**Him** – I was thinking of something more romantic...

**Her** – Are you that interested in her?

**Him** – Her in particular? No... It's just curiosity. I observe people. I try to imagine their lives...

*A pause.*

**Her** – That's how we met, remember?

**Him** – Yes. When you were still a stranger to me...

**Her** – It was in a café.

**Him** – In this café.

**Her** – Feels like it was yesterday.

**Him** – You were sitting at this table.

**Her** – You came up to me and said... that you found an earring.

*A pause.*

**Him** – I still have it.

**Her** – What?

*He takes something out of his pocket and shows it to her.*

**Him** – The earring.

**Her** – And do you still use it sometimes?

**Him** – No...

**Her** – It's beautiful.

**Him** – I'll never know who it belongs to. Somewhere on this earth, there's a girl walking around with the other one. A girl I'll never meet. Maybe that girl...

*A pause.*

**Her** – It was mine.

**Him** – Sorry?

**Her** – That earring, it was mine.

**Him** – I don't believe you.

*She takes something out of her pocket and shows him.*

**Her** – Look, I still have the other one with me.

**Him** – Why didn't you tell me at that time?

**Her** – So that you could keep searching, I suppose.

*He hands her the earring he's holding.*

**Him** – Well, here, I'll give it to you...

**Her** – Thank you.

*Slight awkwardness.*

**Him** – Aren't you going to wear them?

*She puts on both earrings. He looks at her and smiles.*

**Him** – They're not... quite the same.

**Her** – No, I've never managed to find exactly the same ones.

**Him** – They do suit you, though...

*They gaze at each other.*

**Her** – Excuse me, but...

**Him** – Yes?

**Her** – We see each other every day in this café, and we've never really talked... We could get to know each other...

*He takes her hand.*

**Him** – I prefer for you to keep your sense of mystery a little longer.

*Their lips draw closer for a kiss.*

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

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 13<sup>th</sup>*

*Heads or Tails*

*Him and Her*

*Is there a pilot in the audience?*

*Is there an author in the audience?*

*Just a moment before the end of the world*

*Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall*

*New Year's Eve at the Morgue*

*One marriage out of two*

*Quarantine*

*Running on Empty*

*Strip Poker*

*Surviving Mankind*

*The Ideal Son-in-Law*

*The Smell of Money*

*The Window across the courtyard*

*The Worst Village in England*

*Welcome aboard!*

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