

La Comédiathèque

Not even dead

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Translation by the author

Lying on a hospital bed, a man, having lost his memory due to a life-saving surgery, encounters a parade of the women from his past whom he can no longer remember. Could one of them be the love of his life?

Characters

One man and one woman
(or several men and women)

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In a sparsely furnished, sterile room with only a single bed, a bedside table, and a chair, a woman in striped pyjamas is fast asleep. Suddenly, her mobile phone on the bedside table rings, jolting her awake. She answers the call.

Woman – Hello? Yes, it's me... Alright... No, no, I'll hop in my car and be there in a jiffy. Thanks for calling...

She ends the call and takes a moment to contemplate. Then, she swiftly gets out of bed and exits the room.

Silence falls. Overly dramatic music starts playing. Abruptly, the mobile phone rings once more, causing the music to stop. The voicemail message begins.

Woman (off) – You've reached the theatre (possibly followed by the name of the theatre where the play is being performed). We're not available right now. Please refrain from leaving a message, and we promise not to leave one for you either. Don't forget to switch off your mobile phone and let go of the world outside.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

A man, dressed in striped pyjamas, is soundly asleep in the bed. A woman, who could be his mother, enters the room. She's dressed in old-fashioned attire, devoid of makeup, and her demeanour is less energetic. She approaches the bed.

Woman – It's time... (As he doesn't respond, she raises her voice and shakes him energetically.) It's time!

Startled, the man wakes up and gazes at her, his expression a mix of confusion and surprise.

Man – Mum? What are you doing here?

Woman – It's time, my dear.

Man – Time? What time?

Woman – I don't know, but it's time.

Man – But, I mean... Time for what?

He makes an effort to sit up but he hesitates, needing a moment to regain his strength.

Woman – Come on, you lazybones! Make an effort, for heaven's sake! Get up and walk!

He collects himself, his confusion slowly dissipating.

Man – It sounds oddly familiar.

Woman – Sadly, I have to remind you every morning. (*The man looks at his mother, surprised.*) What's the matter? You seem bewildered...

Man – You're telling me? Look, Mom, don't take this the wrong way, but...

Woman – Yes?

Man – I thought you were dead....

Woman – But... I am.

A moment of silence.

Man – I had a feeling something had changed about you.

Woman (*with a puzzled expression*) – Really?

Man – In a good way, I assure you! And what about Dad?

Woman – He's dead too. Are you sure you're not dead?

Man – I don't think so...

Woman – So, not entirely sure, are you?

Man – I suppose when you're dead, you know, right?

Woman – Well, about that... Are you eating well at least?

Man – I don't know... Why do you ask?

Woman – If you're eating, it's a good sign you're not dead.

She searches in her coat pocket and pulls out an apple, which she offers to him.

Woman – Here, I brought you this.

He accepts the apple, a bit cautiously.

Man – An apple... Like the witch in Snow White...

Woman – You think you're Snow White?

Man – I'm just being careful, that's all.

Woman – You're suspicious of your own mother?

Man – I remind you, you're supposed to be dead.

Woman – You think I'm a witch, is that it?

Man – I've learned to be cautious around the unexpected, especially when it comes to the undead. So, about my dearly departed mother.....

The woman looks around.

Woman – This place isn't very cheerful...

He seems to notice the surroundings as well.

Man – No... Where are we?

Woman – It looks like a mental institution.

Man – I guess they'd restrain me in a straitjacket if I were insane.

Woman – And your wife? Does she visit you from time to time?

Man – No... I can't recall clearly... Am I married?

Woman – What about your friends? Do you have any friends at all?

Man – I'm not sure. I haven't come across anyone.

Woman – That's how it's always been... Since you were a child... You were never the most popular.

Man – Well, thanks for the morale boost...

Woman – I find myself wondering why I even came. You're not dead, after all!

Man – Sorry to disappoint you once again.

Woman – You seem to have messed up everything in your life, it seems. (*She gets up, starts to leave but turns around one last time.*) Even your own death.

She exits. He looks at the apple. He takes a bite and places the rest on the bedside table. He chews for a moment before swallowing.

Man – So, I'm not dead...

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The man in striped pyjamas is lying in bed, and he slowly awakens. As he sits up, he looks around, appearing uncertain about his surroundings. Then, the same woman enters, looking twenty years younger. She's dressed more youthfully, with red lipstick, and displays a confident demeanour. She's carrying a simple breakfast on a tray.

Woman – Good morning!

The man clearly struggles to wake up.

Man – Good morning...

Woman – How are you feeling?

Man – I'm fine... I think.

Woman – Here's your breakfast.

Man – Breakfast in bed? Thanks, but... what's the special occasion?

She doesn't provide an immediate response but offers an indulgent smile as she takes a seat by his bedside.

Woman – I'm not sure how good the coffee is. It's definitely not an espresso.

Man – That's fine, I'll still drink it... I feel like I have a hangover.

He starts to drink his coffee and eat a piece of rusk.

Woman – Sorry, I think these are unsalted rusks...

He smiles and continues chewing his rusk.

Man – You know what I was thinking?

Woman – No...

Man – I don't think we can really change things.

Woman – Things? You mean...

Man – Or people.

Woman – Ah, I see...

Man – For instance, with my family... I knew right away it wouldn't work.

Woman – Your family? I'm your wife, remember...

Man – No, I'm not talking about that, of course. You, that's different... *(Pause)* Are you sure we're married?

Woman – Why are you asking me that?

Man – I don't know... I'm sleeping in a single bed...

Woman – Oh, yeah...

Man – I can't even remember that I'm married, can you believe it? The doctor said it's normal. I haven't regained immediate memory.

Woman – We've been married for twenty years...

Man *(lost in thought)* – Yes, it's strange, isn't it? Not regaining immediate memory. That's the last thing I heard, and it's the only thing I remember... *(Pause)* I don't know... Maybe it stems from that...

Woman – What?

Man – The need I've always had to mess everything up... So I wouldn't risk getting disappointed... *(He picks up the apple and looks at it.)* When the worm is in the apple, it can't end well for anyone.

Woman – Except for the worm... (*He looks at her in surprise, and she quickly corrects herself.*) I'm sorry, I don't know why I said that...

Man – No, you're right, it's true... We never think about the worm.

Woman – And you're not an apple.

Man – I don't know. I don't remember anymore.

Woman – Have you taken your medication?

Man – What medication?

Woman – I'll get you a glass of water.

She exits. He takes another bite of the apple. She returns with something changed, either in her clothing (an accessory) or her hairstyle (a wig). Nothing extravagant, but something very noticeable and slightly unusual. He seems not to notice. She hands him a glass of water as if nothing has changed.

Man – Thanks.

He takes the pills she hands him and swallows them. She stares at him.

Man – What's wrong? What's going on?

Woman – I need to tell you something.

Man – Okay.

Woman – It's not easy.

Man – You're scaring me...

Woman – It's not about you. Well, it is, but...

Man – Go on...

Woman – Well, here it is. I'm not exactly who you think I am.

Man – What do you mean? I don't think anything.

Woman – Still, I'm your wife.

Man – Are you saying that... you're cheating on me?

Woman – No, it's not that at all. Well...

Man – Well, what?

Woman – I didn't cheat on you in the sense of... But I deceived you.

Man – When? With whom?

Woman – Not with another man, at least, so don't worry.

Man – I wasn't worried.

Woman – No, I mean... I deceived you, I mean I didn't tell you the truth. I lied to you.

Man – About what?

Woman – About everything. Since forever. In fact, I'm not quite a woman...

Man – So, I'm married to a man, and I never realized it?

Woman – I'm not a man either.

Man – Alright... Somewhere in between, then.

Woman – I'd say more like neither.

Man – Well... is that why we've never had children, I assume?

Woman – Yes... among other things...

Man – Is there something else?

Woman – I'm not from here.

Man – Here? Where are we exactly?

Woman – I come from a different world than yours.

Man – You're a witch... Your name is Samantha, and I'm Darrin.

Woman – Witches don't exist. Everyone knows that.

Man – So, you're not a witch either.

Woman – Do you remember my mother?

Man – No.

Woman – She gave birth to me after an encounter with an extraterrestrial.

Silence. He gazes at her, seemingly searching for a response.

Man – It feels like I've heard a similar story before.

Woman – Perhaps in a church, like the one about the Virgin Mary's pregnancy?

Man – Yes... Or perhaps it's just the medication...

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The same room, but with some details indicating it's a hospital room (a medical chart at the foot of the bed and an IV stand on the other side of the bedside table, for instance). The same man wakes up in the same bed. The same woman enters, but now she's wearing a doctor's white coat.

Woman – So, dear Sir, how are you feeling today?

Man – I'm okay... Well... But what are you doing in my room?

Woman – Ah... This simple question suggests that you haven't quite regained your immediate memory yet.

Man – I don't remember anything... except that you've told me this before.

Woman – Don't worry, it's quite common after this kind of procedure. As soon as the brain is involved...

Man – The brain? I see...

Woman – If you can still see, that's something... Listen, let's not beat around the bush, your condition... is very concerning.

Man – You mean concerning for me, I suppose?

Woman – I would have liked to bring you good news, but what can you do? I'm not God the Father.

Man – Which for me would actually be good news in itself.

Woman – You think so?

Man – Waking up from brain surgery and seeing God the Father...

Woman – Of course... So, the results of our initial tests aren't very promising... for you.

Man – I understand.

Woman – If you can still understand, that's something...

Man – So you're saying... it's serious.

Woman – My God... Not necessarily...

Man – What do you mean?

Woman – What's serious is that... we have no idea what's wrong with you.

Man – Ah... And I imagine that... is serious for you.

Woman – If we don't know what's wrong with you, we also don't know how to treat you. In short, we don't know what to do... And when we don't know what to do, we don't know what to say. Honestly, dear Sir, I don't know what to tell you...

Man – Listen, Doctor... Can I call you Doctor?

Woman – I earned my medical degree in Romania... (*Ecstatic*) But of course, please, call me Doctor.

Man – I know you're very concerned about me, but I'm more worried about my wife's mental state.

Woman – Your wife? Well...

Man – It's hard to believe, but... it turns out my wife thinks she's a Martian.

Woman – Well, would you look at that...

Man – It doesn't seem to surprise you.

Woman – Well, yes, it does, but... to be honest... *(She checks a file.)* I had no idea you were married... At least, it's not in your medical records.

Man – They might have thought it wasn't a serious enough illness to report.

She lets out a somewhat forced laugh.

Woman – Well, at least you've regained your sense of humour. And that's a good sign, isn't it? Do you know Ionesco?

Man – Not personally.

Woman – He was Romanian, like me. And I have the honour of sharing the same surname as him. According to my mother, we're distantly related.

Man – Really?

Woman *(confidentially)* – Between us, I've always thought that Romanians were better suited for the theatre of the absurd than for brain surgery.

Man – Thank you, Doctor Ionesco. That's exactly the reassuring kind of thing a patient wants to hear from their surgeon in the recovery room...

Woman – But of course. I'm here for that. If you have any more questions, don't hesitate to ask.

Man – And... for my wife, can you do something?

Woman – Your wife? My God... First, we'd have to make sure you actually have a wife...

Man – Ah, yes, of course.

Woman – And then that your wife isn't really an extraterrestrial.

Man – What do you mean?

Woman – You'd agree that if your presumed wife is truly a Martian, we can't consider her crazy for claiming to come from the planet Mars.

Man – It's true when you put it that way...

Woman – In any case, that's what they teach us in medical schools in Romania.

He looks at her as if he's just now discovering her.

Man – It's crazy, Doctor Ionesco...

Woman – What is?

Man – You look like my wife. Well, you would look like my wife if I were married.

Woman – Nevertheless... I can assure you that I'm not from the planet Mars.

Man – No, you're from Romania. And... it was you who operated on me, right?

Woman – Unfortunately for you... I suppose a doctor from another part of the galaxy might have saved you.

Man – You think...?

Woman – It's said that those people are much more advanced than us. In any case, we can reasonably assume that their doctors are better trained than mere interns who studied in Bucharest...

Man – Well, yes, but...

Woman – You're right... At this level of speculation, I wonder if we can still call it reasonable assumptions, right? I'll let you rest... I'll come back a bit later...

Man – Can I ask you for one more favour?

Woman – As long as it's not about saving your life...

Man – If you happen to run into my wife, could you tell her that I'm not married?

Woman – I won't forget.

Man – Thank you.

She's about to leave but turns back to him one last time.

Woman – Can I ask you something as well?

Man – As long as it's not what my name is.

Woman – Could you call me Doctor once more?

Man – Thank you, Doctor Ionesco. Goodbye, Doctor.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The man is sitting in his bed, staring into space. The woman enters, dressed as a priest.

Woman – Good morning, my son.

Man (*only slightly surprised*) – Good morning, Daddy...

Woman – I'm the hospital chaplain.

Man – Good morning, Father.

Woman – I came as soon as you called me.

Man – Are you really sure I called you?

Woman – Someone told me to come and see you. They had a slight Romanian accent.

Man – Oh yes... That's my surgeon...

Woman – I gathered that it was quite urgent... But if you feel you're not ready, I can come back later.

Man – No, no, please go ahead. That way, it's done. Just in case. Well, I don't know how long it's valid for...

Woman – Valid?

Man – I mean, the last rites. If you don't die immediately, how long is it valid for? Maybe three months. Like a medical certificate.

Woman – I confess... I've never been asked that question before. And as the situation has never come up for me...

Man – Are you really sure that I'm Catholic?

Woman – Well... I must admit that I've never thought to demand a baptism certificate in these circumstances. I can't imagine a dying person lying about their religion to receive the last rites in extremis. Are you not sure you're a Catholic, my son?

Man – I also don't remember being Jewish or Muslim. And since I'm not circumcised... Are you sure I'm not circumcised?

Woman – My goodness...

Man – I'm sorry, I'm embarrassing you with all my questions. But you know, I'm not used to this. It's my first last rites...

Woman – Yes, I can imagine... Would you at least like to confess, my son?

Man – I don't know, is it... Is it mandatory?

Woman – Let's just say it's strongly recommended. For the sake of your soul's salvation.

Man – Well... what do I have to lose?

Woman – I'm listening, my son.

The man reflects, then looks at her as if he's discovering her.

Man – I must confess that...

Woman – Yes?

Man – It's a bit embarrassing.

Woman – And why is that, my son?

Man – You look so much like my wife, you see.

Woman – I see...

Man – You can understand how, for a married man, having the feeling that his confessor looks like his wife...

Woman – Rest assured, my son. Even if I were your wife, I would still be bound by the seal of confession.

Man – Well, I don't really know where to start...

Woman – You can start at the end.

Man – Confessing is quite challenging when you've lost your memory, you know.

Woman – Are you at least feeling guilty, my son? That would be a start.

Man – I don't know... Are you still guilty when you've lost all memory of your sins?

Woman – You really don't remember anything?

Man – I don't even remember where I parked my car.

Woman – Since you're not able to confess your sins, I'll grant you absolution anyway. In the benefit of the doubt...

Man – Thank you for trusting me, Father. I'll try not to disappoint you.

Woman – But don't forget to rectify your situation as soon as you can.

Man – It's a promise. Cross my heart and hope to die.

She blesses him with a sign of the cross.

Woman – In the name of the Father, the Mother, and the Son.

Man – Amen.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The man slowly regains consciousness in his bed. The woman enters, dressed as a businesswoman, holding a laptop in a briefcase.

Woman – Good morning, dear sir.

Man – Good morning...

Woman – Excuse me for a moment, it won't take long.

Man – Please, go ahead...

She takes the laptop out of the briefcase, turns it on, and places it on the nightstand so that he can see the screen.

Woman – Do you remember the Wi-Fi password?

Man – I don't even remember my name.

Woman – No worries, we can skip it. *(She clears her throat)* Dear sir, I wanted to meet you without delay because I have some good news to share.

Man – A new product, perhaps? A miracle cure? Something that could save my life.

Woman – You've said the words right out of my mouth, dear sir. Indeed, the new financial products I have to offer could change your life.

Man – I suppose you're not a doctor, then.

Woman – I'm your financial advisor. You do hold an account with the Holy Spirit Bank, don't you?

Man – Yes, perhaps.

Woman – I can assure you that you are one of our top clients.

Man – That's good to know. Because I'm not even sure I'm a good Catholic...

Woman – Don't worry; it's not mandatory for stock trading. And as a privileged client of our bank, I wanted to offer you, as a priority, our new investment opportunities with absolutely exceptional returns.

Man – Oh, I see.

Woman – Look at this graph. *(She shows him a chart.)* Our new investment fund, the Phoenix Growth Fund, has gained 27% in the last six months.

Man – The Phoenix? Oh yes, that sounds promising. But why that name?

Woman – The year before, unfortunately, the Phoenix had lost 73% of its stock value. It's a high-risk investment, reserved for the boldest investors, but it always rises from its ashes!

Man – I'm not sure I can say the same.

Woman – Come now, I'm sure I can recognize a fighter in you. The stock market is always a winning investment in the long term.

Man – You know, the long term, for me... I told you I just received the last rites?

Woman – I was getting to that, dear sir. I won't hide from you that you need to decide quickly. This is an exceptional opportunity. But it won't be available for everyone. We can only serve our most reactive clients.

Man – I'm not sure I'm very reactive anymore, even to medical treatments. To be honest, I'm starting to wonder if I'm already dead...

She opens her case and takes out a brochure, handing it to him with a sales smile.

Woman – Don't worry... we also have a range of life and death insurance products.

Man (*taking the document*) – Thank you...

Woman – I'll let you think it over, dear sir. We won't hound you, will we? We're here to provide you with advice, above all...

Man – Right, I'll think it over.

Woman – I'll leave you now; I have other potential investors to see in this facility. By the way, what is this place? Some kind of retirement home?

Man – It's a Palliative Care Unit.

Woman – I see. So, see you very soon. But think fast, dear sir. In your case, especially, you don't have any time to waste... and it would be a shame to miss such an opportunity.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

Someone is lying in the bed, their face not visible. The man enters, dressed in clothing from another era and holding a bouquet of flowers (he's the supposed father of the extraterrestrial woman seen earlier). Seeing that the woman is asleep, the man places the bouquet on the nightstand and leaves the room. The woman awakens and sits up in bed, looking at the bouquet. The man returns with a vase full of water.

Man – I didn't want to wake you...

Woman (*a bit disoriented*) – Thank you for the flowers.

The man places the flowers in the vase and puts it on the nightstand.

Man – How are you feeling?

Woman – I had a bad night... In my dream, you were the one who was ill, and I came to visit you.

Man – But you're not ill.

She looks surprised.

Woman – Then why am I in a hospital bed?

Man – But darling! This is the maternity ward. You've just given birth...

Woman – Ah, yes...

Man – You must still be under the influence of the anaesthesia.

Woman – Anaesthesia?

Man – It was a bit complicated; I'll explain later. But don't worry, everything will be fine now.

Woman – What about the baby?

Man – It's a girl.

Woman – A girl! That's wonderful...

Man – Well, when I say a girl...

Woman – Can I see her?

Man – It was a bit complicated. I'll explain...

Woman – She didn't survive the birth, did she?

Man – No, she didn't die, don't worry. Well, when I say don't worry...

Woman – What's going on? Did she suffer during delivery? Will she have lasting effects?

Man – No... She... Apparently, she won't have any lasting effects. It's just that...

Woman – Is she mongol?

Man – No, not that either. Although nowadays, people say 'trisomic' instead.

Woman – I don't care about what people say! Is she normal or not?

Man – Yes... and no.

Woman – What do you mean, yes and no? Either you're normal or you're not, right?

Man – Let's say she's normal... for an extraterrestrial.

A pause.

Woman – I understand now...

Man – What do you mean, you understand? It doesn't seem to surprise you...

Woman – Well, yes, of course, but... It's coming back to me now.

Man – It's coming back to you? What's coming back to you? (*Seeming to understand something*) Are you telling me that you cheated on me with an extraterrestrial, and you're just realizing it now?

Woman – It's not at all what you think, I assure you.

Man – Oh, really?

Woman – A child... doesn't necessarily require a mother and father. Think about Baby Jesus and the Virgin Mary, for instance!

Man – The Virgin Mary? Are you kidding me? My name isn't Joseph, and I can recognize an adulterous woman when I see one.

Woman – It's a bit more complicated than that...

Man – My wife cheated on me with an extraterrestrial. She just gave birth to an alien, and I was supposed to be the father! I can't imagine something more complicated than that!

Woman – And are you sure she's normal...

Man – What do you mean, normal? She looks like E.T., I'm telling you!

Woman – I'm just wondering... how can a gynaecologist know if an extraterrestrial baby is normal or not when she doesn't even know which planet the father is from?

Man (*dejected*) – You're right... Especially when the gynaecologist is from Romania. Because at least that we know for sure...

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music.

Lights up.

Once again, it's the man who is in the bed, staring into space. The woman enters, dressed quite formally and holding a briefcase.

Woman – Good morning, sir. I'm sorry, I'm a bit late. A small delay.

Man – Do we know each other?

Woman – I'm sorry; I forgot to introduce myself. We haven't had the pleasure of meeting before. I'm Mrs. Eugenia Ionesco, your notary.

Man – Eugenia Ionesco?

Woman – Does that name ring a bell?

Man – Let me think... No, definitely, the first thing that comes to mind is that I'm really screwed.

The woman opens her briefcase and takes out some papers.

Woman – By the way, precisely. As agreed, I've prepared the documents you requested.

Man – Ah, yes...?

Woman – I'm talking about your will, do you remember?

Man – No.

Woman – Anyway, it's always a good thing to get your affairs in order. Just in case...

Man – Yes, a priest told me the same thing not too long ago.

Woman – No one lives forever, do they? I, myself, had a little accident on my way here with my car. A reckless driver. It could have been much worse. That's actually the reason for my delay.

Man – So, that's why the notary arrives after the priest. That seemed strange to me...

Woman – The time it took to fill out the accident report... That fool wouldn't admit he was at fault. He happened to be a priest... Shows that a priest can be stubborn too...

Man – A priest who, strangely, also resembled my wife, I suppose.

Woman – But I don't want to keep you too long. And for me, all this has put me very behind schedule... *(She hands him a stack of papers and a pen.)* If you'd be so kind as to initial and sign. Of course, you're not obligated to read everything.

The man hesitates before taking the document and the pen.

Man – Well, I guess I don't have much of a choice. I feel like I'm signing my own death warrant...

He tries to sign but stops after a few unsuccessful attempts.

Woman – Is there a problem?

Man – Your pen isn't working.

Woman – Let me see... *(She leans over the document.)* Oh, no... It's just that... I forgot to mention. It's invisible ink.

Man – Invisible ink?

Woman – Lemon juice, if you prefer.

Man – Okay...

Woman – Go ahead, sign. *(While he initials and signs)* You see, notaries aren't always welcome in Palliative Care Units.

Man – How strange.

Woman – They even bring in clowns, I've heard, in the hopes of alleviating some patients' suffering by making them laugh themselves to death. Personally, I find clowns to be one of the saddest sights, don't you?

Man – A notary, perhaps...

Woman – The circus, in general. It's quite gloomy. I've always thought it smells of death. Not to mention funfairs, of course.

Man – You were talking about lemon juice, I believe...

Woman – What can I say? Some people are just more suspicious than others. Certain family members wonder if we might make their parent sign anything on their deathbed to part them from their savings and inheritance.

Man – So, if you happen to bump into one on your way out, you can show them this testament and say, "You see, he didn't sign anything."

Woman – Exactly.

Man – And once you're back in your office, you can pass the document under a candle to caramelize the lemon juice. I used to do that when I was a kid.

Woman – We were all kids, weren't we?

Man – But only notaries managed to keep their childlike souls...

Woman – I have to get going. I have other dying patients to see before this evening.

Man – Just out of curiosity... what does this testament say, in a nutshell?

Woman – You bequeath all your assets to a foundation whose purpose is to establish contact with extraterrestrial civilizations.

Man – If it can at least help me re-establish contact with my wife.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The man wakes up in his bed. The woman returns in a white coat.

Woman – Good evening, sir.

Man – Good evening, Doctor.

Woman – This time, I won't ask if you're okay. It's one of those questions that are asked automatically before realizing they shouldn't be.

Man – Have you seen a notary leaving this room with an invisible ink-signed testament?

Woman – My dear sir, I believe that at the stage we're at... I mean, the terminal stage you're at... There's no need to sugarcoat things, is there?

Man – Should I understand that you still don't have good news to share with me?

Woman – You still owe us quite a bit of money. I at least owe you the truth. It was, as they say, the operation of last resort. Unfortunately, the operation didn't work. I'm truly sorry.

Man – I'm not surprised. I've never been lucky...

Woman – Don't have any regrets. In our field, when we talk about the last-ditch operation, we mean an operation with no chance of success.

Man – I understand.

Woman – The whole last-ditch operation thing is just a ploy doctors use to buy time for the family and the patient themselves while they await the inevitable outcome.

Man – Yes, I believe I've grasped the general idea...

Woman – How many patients do you know who have survived after a last-ditch operation?

Man – Well, not many, I admit...

Woman – Exactly... And since we can't believe that all patients are so unlucky...

Man – So, I'm doomed.

Woman – I wouldn't use such harsh terms, but... yes, dear sir, it's time to take stock of your life... and settle your accounts with society. Starting with the one that is the majority shareholder in this hospital...

Man – Thank you for your honesty, Dr. Ionesco.

Woman – Unfortunately, I'll have to ask you to stop calling me Doctor.

Man – Oh, really?

Woman – After reviewing my diplomas and the mortality rate in my surgery department, the hospital administration decided it would be in everyone's best interest to transfer me to the accounting department.

Man – I understand, but then... what are you doing here exactly ?

Woman – Well... When I mentioned settling accounts, it wasn't a metaphor. I've come for the final bill, dear Sir... You're leaving us, of course, but you didn't really think we'd let you go without paying, did you? And it's not going to be covered by your insurance... Hasn't anyone advised you to get supplementary coverage?

Man – What if I can't afford to pay?

Woman – That could seriously jeopardize the salvation of your soul. You see, now... our Recovery Service is extremely efficient.

Man – More efficient than your Surgery Department, at least.

Woman – Let's say... the Romanians we employ in this hospital are much more efficient in debt recovery than brain surgery... And our shareholders have some very high connections now.

Man – You mean... up there?

Woman – What can we do? The sovereign funds that govern us were already managed by the undead. They started by purchasing nursing homes, hospitals, churches, cemeteries... Quite logically, they eventually acquired shares in heaven and hell.

Man – And then?

Woman – Then it's your choice... But you should know that debtors are not well-regarded in heaven.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music.

Lights up.

The man is in his bed. The woman arrives. She's dressed in black and carries a scythe.

Woman – So, dear sir? Is it time to depart? I don't see your little suitcase. Between us, you won't need it where you're going, but it seems to provide some comfort...

Man – Is that a real scythe?

Woman – Oh, this? No, of course not... It's fake. It's made of plastic. Look!

She takes the blade and bends it.

Man – All right.

Woman – No, of course... A real scythe... Someone might get hurt.

Man – Especially in a hospital.

Woman – The scythe is just a symbol. Like a broom for a witch or a crozier for a bishop. So people recognize us immediately when they see it.

Man – I did recognize you immediately, that's true.

Woman – It saves us from having to introduce ourselves. Can you imagine the scene...? Hello, I'm Death. I've come to cut the little breath you have left after this hospital's accountant reaped the last of your remaining wheat.

Man – At least you have a sense of humour...

Woman – You won't be bored with us, that's for sure. So, are you ready?

Man – My God... As ready as one can be. And what do I have to do, exactly?

Woman – You, nothing. I just have to turn off the light...

Man – Will you accompany me on this final journey?

Woman – No, don't worry. I'm just the messenger, so to speak. Or the postman, if you prefer. I'm here for the signed and sealed certificate. Afterward...

Man – All right... Can I have one more minute?

Woman – If you'd like to take one last trip to the bathroom before departing, now's the time. Afterward, you won't have what's necessary for it. Trust me, there comes an age when you have inconveniences, not only pleasures.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music plays.

Lights up.

The man, sitting on the bed, stands up with a suitcase in hand. The woman arrives in an extraterrestrial-like jumpsuit.

Woman – Hello, darling.

Man – But I don't understand... Where is the...

Woman – The Reaper? I sent her to get us two coffees from the vending machine. I didn't think it would be so easy to get rid of her. But we don't have time to waste...

Man – So it was true? Am I really married?

Woman – As true as I am an extraterrestrial.

Man – But how is that possible?

Woman – It's a bit of a complicated story... In fact, it's my mother who... But I'll tell you during the journey.

Man – What journey?

Woman – I'm going to take you to the planet I come from.

Man – And then, what's going to happen?

Woman – Believe me, our hospitals are much more advanced than this one.

Man – And I assume there's no risk of encountering a Romanian intern there.

Woman – None.

He looks around.

Man – And we'll never come back here?

Woman – Don't tell me you'll miss this place.

Man – I was getting used to it.

Woman – If you'd prefer to wait for the Reaper to return from the Psychiatry Department with her thermos and plastic scythe. After all, you've already received the last rites. You can give it a try with the priest...

Man – I don't trust him too much... Pascal's wager... I've never been lucky with bets. Besides, I've never been lucky in general. Even the last-ditch operation failed, so the operation of the Holy Spirit...

Woman – Would you rather trust an extraterrestrial?

Man – If she looks like my wife, why not? So we'll never come back...

Woman – Well, maybe someday. But not right away.

Man – In a very long time, you mean?

Woman – Time... That's what you'll have to forget... Now, we have to go; I see the other one getting impatient over there with her real plastic scythe...

Man – She'll be disappointed for sure. I just told her I was going to pee...

Woman – She imagines that after their death, people go straight to Heaven, accompanied by their guardian angel. We didn't want to upset her.

Man – In the end, in my case, she's not entirely wrong. Except that my guardian angel is a Martian.

Woman – That's why I prefer we leave before she returns. God is like Santa Claus; the day you see him is the day you stop believing in him

She reaches out her hand.

Man (*hesitating*) – Will my mother be there too?

Woman – I told you... It's not paradise... Even the Virgin Mary will be there.

Man – I never thought I'd hear that one day. I'm still wondering if I haven't gone crazy.

Woman – Life is a long therapy from which we don't always emerge cured.

Man – It's also a long illness from which we always come out dead. What does this operation consist of?

Woman – A brain transplant.

Man – Ah... We better make a backup then...

Woman – We're going to transplant a Martian brain into you. Unfortunately, we won't be able to retrieve the data you currently have in memory.

Man – Well... I hardly remembered anything anyway. And I didn't have only good memories either. After all, it's not that bad. No, I do not regret anything. I'm starting from scratch...

Woman – That reminds me of a song...

Man – With you... I would go to the ends of the earth... If you asked me to...

She takes his hand.

Woman – So let's go...

They exit.

Blackout.

Voicemail waiting music.

Lights up.

The room is empty. No one in the bed. A doctor enters with a nurse, both in white coats.

Woman – Ah, in this one, there's no one left...

Man – No, the guy passed away yesterday. It was Dr. Ionesco who operated on him...

Woman – Her last operation...

Man – And her last victim...

Woman – A spot that opens up for the next one.

Man – However, we already had three births this morning in the maternity ward.

Woman – Some leave, others arrive... It's the great cycle of life.

They begin to exit.

Man – Do you know what happened?

Woman – He died, didn't he?

Man – I was talking about Ionesco.

Woman – Ah... She left us too. I think she's into theatre now.

Man – It's still better than being dead.

Woman – Yes... Maybe...

Blackout.

Waiting music for voicemail.

Voiceover – Don't hang up, God will answer you shortly...

Music resumes.

Voiceover – Don't hang up, Mars will answer you shortly...

Music resumes.

Voiceover – Don't hang up, Ionesco will answer you shortly...

Music resumes.

Tone of a busy line or a disconnected call.

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
All's well that starts badly
An innocent little murder
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Cheaters
Check to the Kings
Crash Zone
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but stable
Eurostar
Four stars
Fragile, handle with care
Friday the 13th
Heads or Tails
Him and Her
In lieu of flowers
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Is there a critic in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Last chance encounter
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
One marriage out of two
Preliminaries
Quarantine
Running on Empty
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Ideal Son-in-Law
The Jackpot
The Joker
The perfect Son-in-Law
The Performance is not cancelled
The Smell of Money
The Window across the courtyard
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!

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