

La Comédiathèque

Blackouts

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Blackouts

A sketch comedy by
Jean-Pierre Martinez

Like black holes, blackouts open into strange and unknown parallel universes...

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Cast

For one or more pairs of performers
(Some sketches are gender-neutral)

1. Vaguely

They are standing side by side, exchanging a tender look.

Him – You all right?

Her – Yes... And you?

Him – I'm all right. *(Pause)* We're dead, aren't we?

Her – Why do you say that?

Him – I don't know... The last thing I remember is a thirty-metre wave about to crash over the pool where we'd just lain down for a nap.

Her – Oh yes...

Him – You remember it too?

Her – I do.

Him – So we must be dead.

Her – Or maybe that wave carried us off together, miles away, and gently set us down, without waking us, by the pool of another hotel...

Him – Which would also happen to be called the Paradise Hotel.

Her – Safe and sound. Not even wet.

Him – Not the likeliest scenario, is it?

Her – So we're dead.

Him – Well... dead...

Her – You're right. I can't really tell the difference from when we were alive.

Him – Except that in this world, we don't seem to be married yet.

Her – Why do you say that?

Him – We're not wearing wedding rings.

Her – You don't think we've had children yet either?

Him – I don't see their towels by the pool.

Her – Nor their floaties.

Pause

Him – Maybe we haven't even met yet...

Her – You mean... we don't know each other?

Him – I'm not sure. Do we?

Her – I don't think so.

Pause

Him – So this is what death is.

Her – A parallel world where the hour of our death hasn't struck.

Him – A paradise the tsunami never reached.

Her – And yet... we both saw that wave.

Him – Yes.

Her – If that's how this works, we're not supposed to remember anything from our past lives. Do you remember?

Him – Just fragments.

Her – Me too. I remember the wave... and you... and the kids. Mostly the kids. And you?

Him – Mostly the wave.

Her – It's strange

Him – There must be a glitch in the system. We're not meant to remember.

Her – Otherwise people would realise they're already dead.

Him – Should we tell them?

Her – Tell who what?

Him – Tell *them* they're dead.

She looks out towards the audience.

Her – Look at them... They seem happy. They wouldn't believe us.

Him – They'd think we were mad. Lock us away.

Her – No. Let's keep it to ourselves.

Him – You're right.

Her – Our secret.

Pause.

Him – Shall we?

Her – Shall we what?

Him – Go and see what's different in this world... this world where the tsunami never hit the Paradise Hotel.

Her – And where we haven't met yet.

Him – I'd like to know what happens.

Her – Yes... Even if it's a little frightening.

Him – First we'll need to find out which room we're in.

Her – Since we didn't know each other, we probably weren't in the same room.

Him – Let's ask at reception.

Her – Let's do that.

Him – Come on.

They begin to walk off.

Her – Still... it was a lovely day, wasn't it?

Him – It was.

Her – Who could've guessed...

Him – That we'd meet today.

They walk off.

2. Comma

They are tenderly embracing. They break the embrace, still smiling blissfully.

Him – We're good together, aren't we?

Her – Yes... *(Pause)* But do you mean, “We're good together?” Or “We're good, together?”

Him – Uh... I'm not sure... What's the difference?

Her – The comma.

Him – The comma?

Her – With the comma, it means we're good when we're together. Without the comma, it means... are we really together?

Him – Oh. Right.

Her – Exactly.

A moment of worry. Another hug for reassurance. Then they separate again, still smiling.

Him – Do you remember how we met?

Her – Yes... *(Pause)* Actually... no. Do you?

Him – No, me neither. I thought you'd know...

Her – Where could we have met, do you think?

Him – If we're together, we must've met somewhere.

Her – Obviously...

Him – But where?

Her – I don't know... Where do people usually meet? You know, a man and a woman.

Him – At a party?

Her – Do we have any mutual friends?

He checks his phone.

Him – Not according to Facebook.

Her – Apparently, one in four couples meet at work.

Him – Where do you work?

Her – I'm... I think I'm a stripper. And you?

Him – Plumber.

Her – Plumber?

Him – Have they done any plumbing recently at your strip club?

Her – Oh no, I don't work in a club. I do it as a hobby. At home...

Him – I see...

Her – And you?

Him – No, no, I'm... I'm a proper plumber. I mean, I work at other people's places. I think...

Her – Got it.

Him – So... have you had a plumber over recently?

Her – No... but there was some kind of water damage a while ago.

Him – One of the water guys? You mean a guy from the water company?

Her – No... actual water damage. A leak.

Him – Oh, right, yeah... A leak. Of course. Not a hit-and-run or anything... I mean... Maybe I should go?

Her – Go? Where to?

Him – I... I don't know... Home?

Her – You don't live here?

Him – Do you think I live here?

Her – I'm not sure. Do you live somewhere else?

Him – I... can't really remember. Are you sure you live here?

She looks around.

Her – Doesn't look familiar.

He picks up a cardboard sign from the floor.

Him – Look...

Her – What is it?

Him – A sign.

Her – What does it say?

Him – Do Not Disturb.

Her – And the other side?

Him – Please Make Up the Room.

Her – Oh right.

She moves as if about to tidy up.

Him – What are you doing?

Her – Making up the room. That's what you told me.

Him – I didn't! That's what the sign says.

Her – This is all very strange.

Him – Yeah... Maybe we should just go back to bed.

Her – Back to bed? You mean... together?

Him – I... don't know... Should we?

Her – Yes, yes...

Him – Maybe it'll all make more sense after a nap.

Her – I hope so...

Him – I'll hang up the Do Not Disturb sign.

Her – Yes, I think that's safest.

3. Antipathy

They are standing on opposite sides of the stage. They exchange furtive glances. He finally walks over to her.

Him – Excuse me... I've been looking at you for a while and... Please don't take this the wrong way, but... You're really not my type...

Her – Thanks...

Him – No, what I mean is... It's strange, but I feel like I've seen you before. Not just in passing. Like I *know* you.

Her – Oh really...?

Him – Sorry, I must sound completely ridiculous...

Her – Not at all... I mean, yes you are completely ridiculous, but... I feel like I know you too. Really well, in fact.

Him – Oh... So I'm not mad..

Her – That depends.

Him – Depends?

Her – Maybe we met in a psychiatric ward. Would explain why we've blocked it out...

Him – Right... So you too...

Her – Absolutely... Your face rings a bell, but... I've no idea why.

They look at each other for a moment.

Him – What's odd is... you look so familiar. I'm sorry, this might sound awkward, but... You wouldn't happen to be one of my exes?

Her – Wow... As pick-up lines go, that's a new one. But given I'm clearly not your type... Seems unlikely.

Him – Could explain why it didn't last. Sorry, I'm being...

Her – Don't be. For what it's worth, you're not my type either.

Him – That's a relief.

Her – No offence, but... I really don't like the look of you.

Him – Same here...

Her – I don't just mean I can't place your name. I mean your face... there's something about it I really can't stand.

Him – That's funny... I was trying to find a polite way to say the exact same thing.

Her – Well, at least we've got that in common.

Him – Yes... But it still doesn't explain how we know each other, or where we might've met.

Her – Mind you, considering the tone we've already set... and the depth you've just dug yourself into... I'm not sure it's worth digging any further.

Him – You're right... Best leave it there. Imagine if it all came flooding back and...

Her – Yes, that would really be...

Him – Some things are better left forgotten.

Her – Absolutely... Imagine if I suddenly remembered that... *(She gives him a strange look.)* Wait a minute... It's coming back now...

Him – No...? What?

Her *(outraged)* – You really don't remember?!

Him – Er... no, but... wow, we're suddenly close, huh?

She glares at him, a hateful grin spreading across her face.

Her – You bastard!

Him – Was it that bad?

Her – And you've got the nerve to ask me that?!

Him – I'm sorry, I... I honestly don't remember...

Her – You don't remember *me*? After what you did to me?!

Him – I don't know what to say... I can't see myself hurting anyone. Let alone a woman. But... I've got to admit... there's something about you I find so deeply irritating... Under extreme circumstances, I guess I might have...

Her – You piece of filth... So you're not even going to deny it?

Him – I am! I mean... no... Please, just tell me! I need to know now. Whatever it is, I'm ready.

She steps toward him, threatening.

Her – I don't know what's stopping me from...

Him – No, go ahead... If you think I deserve it...

Suddenly, she adopts a detached tone, a slight smile on her lips.

Her – I'm just messing with you. I've got no idea who you are.

Him – Oh right...

Her – That said... I do think in a past life, I might have killed you. You really have a punchable face. Has no one ever told you that?

Him – Not quite so bluntly, no...

Her – Honestly, I'm surprised.

Him – Yes... I think we'd better leave it there, don't you?

Her – Sounds wise.

Him – Well then... goodbye.

Her – Goodbye?

Him – I mean, who knows, maybe we'll bump into each other again.

Her – At least if we do, we'll know why we feel like we've met before.

Him – Exactly... *(She's about to go.)* No, but you don't have to leave...

Her – I was leaving anyway.

Him – I was just going too.

Her – Well... let's go then.

Him – OK. I was heading that way. You too?

Her – Yes...

Him – Let's walk a bit together. Maybe it'll come back to us.

Her – Unless we kill each other first...

Him – That's always a possibility... I'm liking you less and less by the second.

Her – The feeling's mutual.

They walk off.

4. Optical Illusion

They stand side by side, facing the audience, gazing toward the back wall.

Him – Nice day, isn't it?

Her – Bit windy though.

Him – rue. Wind probably chased the clouds away...

Pause.

Her – Do you see that window over there?

Him – Which window?

Her – Just behind that tree. Half-hidden by the leaves.

Him – Oh yes, that one... Funny. I've never seen a light on there, not even at night.

Her – I wonder who lives there.

Him – Maybe no one. Could be empty.

Her – Maybe... But during the day, I sometimes see shapes through the glass. Through these branches.

Him – Really?

Her – A man and a woman, I think.

Him – Sounds like something out of a film...

Her – Which one?

Him – *Rear Window*! Don't tell me you think the guy murdered his wife.

Her – No... but I've got a weird feeling about that place.

Him – Don't you have anything better to do than spy on the neighbours?

She smiles, then stares again, more intently.

Her – Wait a second... That's bizarre. It looks like...

Him – What?

Her – There's a terrible wind today, and the leaves aren't moving at all.

He looks, puzzled.

Him – You're right... That's odd.

Her – You'll laugh, but...

Him – Try me.

Her – The tree... It's an optical illusion.

Him – An optical illusion?

Her – I swear. Look again.

He leans in, more focused.

Him – You're right. I'd never noticed it before.

Her – I had a feeling something was off...

Him – But wait... if the tree's not real, the window can't be either.

Her – You think?

Him – How could a fake tree hide a real window?

Her – True, that wouldn't make sense.

Her – If the tree is painted on the wall, then the window must be too.

Him – A tree that doesn't exist... hiding a window that doesn't exist either.

Her – That's why the illusion works so well. We assume that if something is hidden, it must be real. Why hide something that isn't even there?

Him – Like God. The less you see, the more you believe.

Her – If God went shopping in supermarkets with a fake beard and a shabby coat like Father Christmas at Christmas time, people wouldn't believe in him for long.

Him – Quite right...

Pause.

Her – What if we're illusions too?

Him – What?

Her – Maybe whoever's watching us just sees... tricks of light. Paintings. Photos.

Him – But we're here, we move, we talk.

Her – So do videos.

Him – We're in 3D.

Her – So are holograms. Maybe we're just... three-dimensional illusions.

Him – We should ask the neighbours opposite.

Her – Then again, how much can you trust the neighbours... if they're illusions too?

Him – I think we're losing our minds.

Her – You're right. I'll close the window.

She hesitates.

Him – Don't tell me... it's painted on the wall?

They share an uneasy look.

5. Black and White

She is already there. He enters, carrying a large notebook.

Her – Hello, hello... Come in, come in...

Him – Thank you, thank you...

Her – It wasn't too difficult to get here, was it? With all these strikes...

Him – I live just across the street.

Her – Across the street? You mean...

Him – The building opposite.

Her – Oh, I see... I didn't realise... That's funny, I was convinced that window on the wall opposite was just trompe-l'œil.

Him – Trompe-l'œil?

Her – Yes. I thought the window was painted on the wall. I've never seen anything move behind it.

Him – And yet here I am.

Her – Quite. So from your living room, you can see everything that goes on in here.

Him – Absolutely everything.

She laughs nervously, as if to reassure herself.

Her – Mind you... What could possibly happen in a literary agent's office that's worth spying on?

Him – That's for you to tell me.

Her – Of course, of course... So, how's the new novel coming along?

Him – I'm nearly finished.

Her – Excellent, excellent... I do hope it's original, because you know how it is these days... The literary season is more and more overcrowded... So many people writing about their little lives and their little woes, convinced the entire planet will be riveted.

Him – Don't worry, it's not auto-fiction.

Her – Thank goodness... What we really need now is a new Robbe-Grillet. A new Perec. A new Butor. Someone who can still shake up the codes of the traditional novel.

Him – You'll see. It'll surprise you. I wouldn't be shocked if you called me a brute when you're done reading it.

Her – That's the spirit! Blow it all up, like in '68! We knew it wouldn't last, that six months later everyone voted for De Gaulle, and sixty years on Cohn-Bendit would think he *is* De Gaulle, but still... it was cathartic.

Him – Funny you mention “cathartic”, because... well, you'll understand when you take a look at my manuscript.

Her – Now you've got me intrigued, my dear. I can't wait to see it. Have you brought me a few juicy pages?

Him – I'm nearly finished. Here, take a look...

He hands her the large notebook.

Her – All right, all right... Oh yes, this is hefty, isn't it? Not too long, I hope? You know how it is, anything over 200 pages... It's the SMS generation. People don't turn pages anymore...

She puts on her reading glasses.

Him – It's about 900 pages. But don't worry, it's a very easy read.

Her – Fine, fine... And what's the title?

Him – *Black and White*.

Her – *Black and White*... A tribute to Stendhal, perhaps?

Him – More to Soulages, actually... That's what I meant earlier when I said...

Her – Soulages? Goodness... I love Soulages.

Him – In fact, I first thought of calling it *Memoirs of Beyond-Black*.

Her – Ah yes... a little nod to Chateaubriand, then. But tell me, Stendhal, Chateaubriand... Are you sure this is how you're going to revolutionise the novel?

Him – Trust me, it's quite something.

Her – All right, all right... Let's have a look.

She opens the notebook and starts turning the pages.

Him – I'll let you take a moment to get a feel for it...

Her – Yes... but tell me. You seem to have left a few blank pages at the beginning. When does it actually start?

Him – It already has.

Her – I beg your pardon?

Him – The blank pages are the beginning.

Her – I'm not sure I follow...

Him – I told you it would surprise you. Look. I calculated that on an average printed page, the black ink, the text, occupies about eight percent of the white page.

Her – Eight percent?

Him – On average. It depends on the font, of course. With a bold typeface, it can go up to nine or even ten percent.

Her – Really...? And so...?

Him – So I decided to separate the black from the white.

Her – I see...

Him – Then I wondered whether I should start with the white and end with the black, or the other way around...

Her – Right...

Him – In the end, I chose to begin with the white... to build a sense of anticipation in the reader, you see?

Her – I see, I see...

Him – A kind of suspense, if you like.

Her – I'm not sure what I like anymore... (*Turning pages*) So... all the pages are blank.

Him – Not at all. And that's where it gets interesting. For simplicity's sake, I went with an even ten percent. So after every nine white pages, there's one black page.

Her – Black?

Him – Completely black.

Her – Why black?

Him – I knew that would throw you a bit. But that's what you wanted, isn't it? Something new?

Her – Yes, well...

Him – That black page, after the nine white ones, concentrates all the ink that *should* have been used to fill the others. But in my novel, those nine pages stay blank. You follow?

Her – I follow, I follow...

Him – I can see it's left you a bit perplexed. That's normal. All innovation is unsettling at first. So if you'll allow me, I'll give you a metaphor to help you grasp the revolutionary nature of this work.

Her – A metaphor?

Him – A novel is like an omelette. And let's face it, we've seen every kind of omelette. You can throw in onions, potatoes, herbes de Provence... but it's still an omelette. What I'm doing here is radical: I'm going back to basics. I separate the whites from the yolks. Or rather, the white from the black. Hence the title.

Her – You're taking the piss, aren't you?

Him – I knew you'd say that... But no more than all those painters who sell you a completely white or completely black canvas and pompously call it “monochrome”!

Her – Of course...

Him – This novel is a founding gesture. Later on, of course, I could write others, where the white isn't quite so white, and the black not quite so black. But always respecting this sacred ratio of ten percent!

Her – Ten percent.

Him – Painters have the golden ratio—why not writers? And just to prove how sacred that number is: ten percent, that's what *you* take as my agent on all my royalties!

Her – And you honestly think I'm going to give you an advance for this pile of nonsense?

Him – As I said, I live just across the road... and from my flat, I can see *everything* that goes on in this office.

Her – Everything?

Him – Everything. I even have video...

Her – I see... And... how much are you asking to forget what you've seen?

6. Back to the Future

She is already there, wearing a white lab coat. He enters, dressed in everyday clothes.

Her – Good morning, sir. Thank you for agreeing to take part in this experiment, which, I should remind you, is part of a strictly confidential research programme. It's actually classified as top secret.

Him – Please know that I accepted your offer not for the generous compensation attached to this therapeutic trial, but purely out of civic duty. I'm a practising Catholic, and also a trade unionist. If my modest contribution can help cure Humanity of one of the many ills it still suffers from...

Her – Yes... Well, on that note, let me explain the real purpose of this research programme. It wasn't something we felt necessary to disclose before participants were officially selected. But now that you're on board, we owe you full transparency, about both our objectives and what led us to launch the project. It's code-named *Back to the Future*.

Him – *Back to the Future*?

Her – You'll soon understand why.

Him – But this is a drug trial, isn't it?

Her – Well... not exactly.

Him – You've piqued my curiosity, Doctor.

Her – In fact, sir... it's your sperm we're interested in.

Him – That's not curiosity anymore, that's alarm.

Her – Earlier, you mentioned the many afflictions that still plague Humanity.

Him – I was thinking of Ebola, COVID, AIDS...

Her – All very real diseases, and sadly, ones for which there's still no fully effective vaccine.

Him – But...?

Her – But let's be honest: if we look at things objectively... are those really the threats that endanger Humanity itself?

Him – No, probably not.

Her – So, in your view, what is the danger driving our planet towards collapse?

Him – I... I'm not sure...

Her – That danger, sir, is Man.

Him – Man?

Her – Well, woman too, of course. I mean the human species as a whole.

Him – Ah, yes...

Her – Overpopulation, deforestation, resource depletion, global warming, nuclear war...

Him – Certainly... but what does my sperm have to do with fixing all that?

Her – Sir, the situation, as we understand it with the tools at our disposal, is even more desperate than you can imagine.

Him – Really...?

Her – And from that grim assessment, we reached the only viable solution to avoid total catastrophe, in other words, the end of the world.

Him – I'm listening...

Her – Faced with all the horrors Man has unleashed, have you ever asked yourself a simple question: When did it all start to go wrong?

Him – Yes, well... And what's your answer?

Her – It's painfully obvious: when the ape became Homo sapiens.

Him – I see...

Her – Or from your Catholic perspective: when God created Man.

Him – Are you saying God made a mistake?

Her – Just look at the results. It was a ticking time bomb.

Him – Right... And what exactly are you proposing?

Her – We did consider creating a superman. But that's been tried, with disastrous consequences. With man, we head for disaster. With superman, we sprint there.

Him – Quite.

Her – So the answer isn't forward motion, it's reverse.

Him – Reverse?

Her – A few months ago, the world's leading scientists, together with top humanities experts, philosophers included, met in secret under the auspices of the UN. They reached a single conclusion: the only sustainable way to save the planet is to regress humanity... back to ape form.

Him – Back? What do you mean, “back”?

Her – Not overnight, of course. But by gradually modifying the genetic traits of our descendants, through guided natural selection. And that's where you come in.

Him – Me?

Her – Or at least... your sperm.

Him – You'll have to explain...

Her – Scientific studies show that, of all demographic groups worldwide, practising Catholics are genetically the closest to apes.

Him – Really?

Her – Actually, the same goes for religious believers more broadly. But when we approached fundamentalists from other faiths, they refused to cooperate...

Him – I see...

Her – And we couldn't exactly create a new subspecies based solely on the DNA of religious extremists. Some apes are very aggressive, you know...

Him – Quite right...

Her – That's why we also screened among practising Catholics.

Him – And why me, specifically?

Her – This is where your union membership works in your favour. Statistically, Catholic members of reformist unions tend to be less aggressive and more cooperative.

Him – I see.

Her – So now that you know everything, I must ask you once again, sir: are you willing, by donating your sperm, to contribute to the regeneration of the human race by guiding it back to its simian state?

Him – I must admit... I wasn't expecting that.

Her – Now you understand the name of our last-chance mission: *Back to the Future*. By returning Man to a primate condition, we hope that when evolution resumes, he might choose a wiser path.

Him – I'm honoured by your trust, and I'm aware of the responsibility. So yes. I confirm my willingness to take part in this operation to save Humanity.

Her – Thank you, sir. Given what we know about you, I'm not surprised by your response. I'll be in touch shortly to begin the procedure.

Him – I remain at your disposal.

Her – Thanks to you, in two or three generations, Man will have forgotten he was ever Man.

He exits. She takes out her phone and dials.

Her – You won't believe it : he said yes...

7. Confession

He is seated, facing the audience. She enters and sits beside him, also facing the audience.

Him – I'm listening, my child...

Her – It's not easy, Father.

Him – Through me, you confess your sins to our Lord. Remember: a sin confessed is a sin half forgiven. And if your repentance is sincere, whatever you've done, you shall be absolved.

Her – The thing is... I'm not sure this is really a sin.

Him – If you believe you've committed no sin, why come to confession? But you know, we all sin, alas.

Her – Even you?

Him – Of course. Even me. I am but a man.

Her – So who do *you* confess to? I've always wondered. Like with hairdressers, who cuts their hair? Or doctors. You don't imagine a doctor falling ill. And yet... they're only human too...

Him – I believe we're straying from the point, my child. How long has it been since your last confession?

Her – I've never confessed.

Him – In that case, how can you claim to have never sinned? Even if you were a Saint...

Her – I'm no Saint. But what I have to tell you is rather extraordinary.

Him – Well... If it helps you, I'm listening. And together we'll see whether or not it's a sin.

Her – Well then, Father, if I may say so humbly... I believe I've uncovered the mystery of the universe.

Him – The mystery of...? If this is some sort of joke, let me remind you that mocking the sacrament of confession is, in itself, a sin.

Her – I knew you'd think I was mad... That's why I came to you. If *you* won't listen to me, who will?

Him – All right then. I'm listening...

Her – Well, Doctor...

Him – *Father.*

Her – Sorry. Well then, Father... I think I've figured it all out. How it works. And more importantly, why.

Him – *It all?*

Her – The world! Life, death, good, evil...

Him – Nothing too ambitious, then?

Her – The universe, galaxies, black holes, aliens...

Him – I see... And how exactly have you come by such universal insight? You're a scientist, I presume? If so, let's be clear: my field is doubt, faith, and belief. Not certainty, truth, or knowledge.

Her – That's the surprising bit. I'm absolutely not a scientist. I've always been rubbish at maths, actually. But ever since I was a little girl, I've asked myself questions about all this. Haven't you?

Him – I have... In my own way.

Her – And in your own way, you believe you've found the truth.

Him – Let's focus on what brings you here today...

Her – Of course. I quickly realised I'd never find the answers to questions that humans have been asking for thousands of years, without any luck.

Him – And...?

Her – And yet, just when I'd given up... last night, everything became clear.

Him – Really?

Her – I was fast asleep. I woke up in a sweat. And the answer came to me in a flash.

Him – Don't tell me you had a divine vision... Saw the Virgin, perhaps?

Her – No, of course not. And as for the secret of the universe... Let's just say God doesn't really have much to do with it. That's partly why I came to you first. So you could, you know... pass it on to your boss.

Him – That's very thoughtful of you. But just out of curiosity, could you give me an idea of what you think you've discovered?

Her – You'll see, it's actually incredibly simple.

Him – Biblical?

Her – I was expecting something impossibly complicated. After all, scientists on one side and philosophers on the other have never come close to even a hint of an answer.

Him – And...?

Her – Well... no. It's very simple. Though obviously quite astonishing. Otherwise, someone else would've figured it out before me...

Him – I must admit: you've piqued my curiosity. I'm listening...

Her – Because the answer came to me in a dream, I wrote it down straight away, on a scrap of paper. Simple as it was... you know what dreams are like. You forget them the moment you wake up.

Him – Then please don't keep me waiting. Especially since I have other parishioners waiting for confession after you...

Her – Right. Well then...

Him – Yes?

Her – Hang on, I'll tell you right now...

Him – I'm waiting.

She rummages in her bag, but can't find the paper.

Her – Oh, bugger it...

Him – What now?

Her – I've no idea what I've done with it. I was sure I'd put it in my bag...

Him – But surely you remember the gist of it?

Her – I'm telling you, it's like a dream. So clear while you're asleep. So obvious. But...

Him – Yes...?

Her – Oh, it's no good... It's on the tip of my tongue...

Him – I see...

Her – No, this is ridiculous... The secret of the universe! I *had* it, and now... it's gone.

Him – Really?

Her – No, wait, it'll come back to me... It had something to do with... Oh hell, I've no idea...

Him – Well then. Have you anything else to confess?

Her – No...

Him – In that case, I must ask you to leave. There are others in greater need of spiritual comfort.

Her – Of course. Forgive me. But I'll think it over, and if it comes back to me...

Him – Yes. Think it over, and come back if it does.

Her – Thank you. How much do I owe you, Doctor?

Him – You may leave an offering in the box on your way out.

Her – It will come back to me, I'm sure... And maybe I'll find that damn scrap of paper... It wasn't as long as the Bible, obviously...but still... It all fit into a single sentence.

Him – One sentence?

Her – Sadly... I've forgotten it.

8. Tribute

They stand side by side facing the audience. He is slightly in front, she slightly behind. They wear tense smiles and appropriately solemn expressions. He clears his throat and pulls a piece of paper from his pocket, glancing at it occasionally.

Him – Dear friends, dear colleagues... We are gathered here today to honour the memory of Jean-Claude, who sadly left us quite suddenly a few days ago. To all of us, Jean-Claude was more than just a colleague, he was a friend. I would even say, almost a member of the family... Jean-Claude was a man...

She discreetly tries to get his attention by coughing. Seeing he doesn't understand, she leans in and whispers something to him.

Him – Forgive me for getting our dear departed's name wrong. It's the emotion, no doubt... Jean-Jacques was a man... discreet, but appreciated by all. Throughout his career in the Roads Department... *(She gives him another awkward look and coughs. He glances again at his paper and corrects himself.)* Throughout his career in the Land Registry Office, I should say, and in the service of his fellow citizens, and thus of France itself, Jean-Paul never once drew attention for bad behaviour, a temper tantrum, or even a raised voice. No, Jean-Paul was not one to seek the spotlight. Always willing in the canteen to give up his place in the queue to someone in a hurry. Always ready to fill in for a sick colleague. Always happy to take his summer leave in January so others could enjoy their holidays in the sun with their families.

Yes, more than just discreet, one could say that Jean-Jacques, even in life, had already chosen to fade quietly into the background. But it was so that those he loved could flourish all the more. Yes, Jean-Charles, considering how little space you took up in this world, it's fair to say that your absence leaves a great void behind you. Just before retirement, you leave us as you lived—without wanting to cause a fuss. At least you died peacefully. It was the heart that gave out—probably because it was too big... *(She again whispers something to him.)* The heart... and also, I'm told, the tram that hit you just outside your home.

That same tram that was meant to take you here, on what should have been your last day at work, and which instead took you straight to the end of the line. You depart, nevertheless, surrounded by the love of those close to you, especially your devoted wife... *(She signals to him again, and he corrects himself.)* That is, the wife from whom you divorced many years ago...

They say it's hardest for those left behind. Fortunately, you leave no widow, and no children. But your family mourns you nonetheless, Jean-Philippe. Because your family was us.

Thank you all for being here today to honour one last time the memory of our dearly missed Jean-Bernard. May he rest in peace. And may he now, at last, enjoy the eternal retirement he so richly deserves—one which, at least, won't cost a penny to the pension fund.

Farewell, Jean-Christophe. Your colleagues will never forget you...

Moment of transition, as the audience is presumed to disperse. They remain alone.

Him (*putting away the paper*) – Bloody hell, what a nightmare. Who the hell wrote this rubbish? Was it you?

Her – Your deputy mayor. To be fair, he didn't seem terribly close to the deceased.

Him – Neither was I... Did you know the bloke?

Her – No, not personally. Apparently, he was very discreet.

Him – Are we even sure he's dead?

Her – Oh yes, I think so... I'll double-check.

9. PIN Code

They are standing side by side, facing the audience.

Him – Well?

Her – No, I really can't remember...

Him – Are you sure you didn't write it down somewhere?

Her – I did! Yes, of course I wrote it down somewhere.

Him – So...?

Her – The problem is, I can't remember *where* I wrote it down.

Him – Right...

Her – The whole point of secret codes is not to write them in big letters on the fridge... or on your suitcase when you go on holiday.

Him – The point is mostly to remember *where* you hid them.

Her – Exactly. And clearly I hid it so well, even I can't find it.

Him – And the PIN, you've no idea what it was?

Her – Not exactly. I've only got three attempts, and I've already used two.

Him – Sounds like a genie in a bottle: you only get three wishes.

Her – I'm trying to remember... There are just so many passwords these days.

Him – I use the same one for everything. That way, I never forget.

Her – And that way, if someone hacks you, they can access everything.

Him – But at least I can access my account!

Her – Well go on then, access your account!

Him – I lost my bank card, you know that.

Her – You remember your PIN but lost your card. I still have my card but forgot the code.

Him – Wasn't it your date of birth?

Her – I never give my date of birth to anyone. Not even my bank.

Him – Your National Insurance number?

Her – I like to choose passwords that are a bit harder to hack, thank you.

Him – Including by you...

Her – I think this one wasn't just a random string of numbers, like I use for the lottery.

Him – So you don't remember the winning numbers either?

Her – We've only got one attempt left. If it's wrong, the machine eats the card, and we starve.

Him – Like the rest of the poor sods in this godforsaken country. What were we thinking, coming here for our holidays...

Her – That was your idea, if you remember. *I* wanted to go to Brittany. At least in Brittany we wouldn't be dying of hunger.

Him – All right, no need to panic. We could always go to the consulate...

Her – The nearest consulate is two hundred kilometres away. We don't even know where we'll sleep tonight...

Him – So what do you suggest?

Her – We've no choice. I have to try.

Him – Try what?

Her – I'll just type something and hope my fingers remember. I've done this PIN so many times, my hands probably know it better than my brain.

Him – You think so?

Her – The more I think about it, the less I remember. So I won't think at all. I'll just do it.

Him – I'm not sure that's wise...

Her – Got a better idea?

Him – No...

Her – Then here goes.

Him – OK... But really focus.

Her – No! I just told you, I mustn't think.

Him – Right, right...don't think.

Her – I'm trying...

Him – I'm sure you can do it...

Her – I feel like I'm about to bungee jump... OK. I'm going.

She closes her eyes and types in a code. They both hold their breath.

Him – Well?

Her – It worked!

Him – Hallelujah!

Her – So we've got a bit of cash—but you can only withdraw a hundred euros at a time abroad.

Him – That won't get us very far. Still, we can always get more now that you've remembered your code...

Her – Well, about that...

She looks suddenly troubled.

Him – What?

Her – I typed the code without thinking...

Him – And...?

Her – I've no idea what I typed.

Him – You didn't see it?

Her – I had my eyes closed! To make sure I didn't think of anything!

Pause

Him – I've got a feeling this holiday is going to be... unforgettable.

10. Childhood Sweethearts

He is already there. She enters.

Her – Do you recognise me?

Him – No... Should I?

Her – Mary!

Him – Mary... Do we know each other?

Her – We were in nursery school together.

Him – Nursery school?

Her – I think you even had a little crush on me.

Him – Oh, that's...

Her – You don't remember?

Him – No... Then again, nursery school's a long time ago. But how can you recognise me after all this time? Don't tell me I haven't changed...

Her – Well yes, of course, we've both changed a lot.

Him – Then how...? If we haven't seen each other since nursery...

Her – Ah, but I have seen you since. Not every day. Just now and then. But I have seen you.

Him – What do you mean?

Her – I used to live just across the road. Still do. When my parents passed away about ten years ago, I kept the house. And you... looks like you've moved back in with your parents too...

Him – Yes, well... I haven't been back very long.

Her – Three months.

Him – Roughly, yes.

Her – But you used to visit them regularly. So... I'd catch sight of you from time to time.

Him – And you're only speaking to me now?

Her – I didn't dare... I didn't want to bother you.

Him – So why today?

Her – I don't know... I got divorced six months ago...

Him – Right...

Her – And you?

Him – Three months ago... *(Pause)* Did you know?

Her – Yes.

Him – You knew my wife?

Her – I'd seen her around.

Him – Seen her around?

Her – We were at school together.

Him – I see.

Her – It's a small town.

Him – Yes.

Her – I imagine it's a bit of a shock.

Him – You mean... the divorce?

Her – Seeing me again. After all these years.

Him – Oh right... Mary...

A moment of awkward silence. They're not sure what to say next.

Her – Close your eyes.

Him – Sorry?

Her – Close your eyes, and listen to my voice.

He closes his eyes.

Him – OK...

She leans in and whispers in his ear, in a voice meant to be enchanting.

Her – Mary. Mary Durant. We were in Reception class together. I wore a red coat, a duffle coat. I had pigtails. And one day, during break time... *(She kisses him gently on the lips.)* You kissed me. On the mouth. You really don't remember?

Him *(visibly moved)* – Mary... Oh yes, maybe...

He opens his eyes again.

Her – Of course, seeing me again like this... after so many years... I know I've changed a lot.

Him – Well yes, naturally.

Her – But I've seen you grow up...

Him – Yes. And even age a little. So of course... It doesn't come as such a shock.

Pause.

Her – Maybe we could see each other again...

Him – If you live across the road... I'm sure we will.

Her – All right then... I'll head off.

She turns to go.

Him – Is it true, that story?

Her – What story?

Him – That we were in nursery school together... and all the rest.

Her – What do you think?

Him – I don't know...

Her – What would you rather believe?

Him – It's a beautiful story.

Her – Then let's say it's true...

She walks away.

11. The Forgotten Woman

He is already there. She enters.

Him – So then, what can I get the lady?

Her – I don't know.

Him – Oh, you don't seem too cheerful... Would you like a little pick-me-up?

Her – I'd tell you what I want, but in a minute you'll have forgotten.

Him – Oh I doubt that. I never forget an order, miss.

Her – You'll forget mine, you'll see.

Him – Oh really? And why's that?

Her – Because I'm the one everyone forgets.

Him – Sorry?

Her – I'm *The Forgotten One*. It's always been like that. Since I was born.

Him – Like what? What do you mean?

Her – Even when she was pregnant, my mother used to forget she was expecting.

Him – No kidding...

Her – When I was born, my father forgot to register my birth. And when my mother left the hospital, she forgot to bring me home.

Him – Seriously?

Her – It's not that they didn't love me. They just forgot me. All the time. They'd regularly forget to pick me up from school. And don't get me started on the number of service stations and hotel rooms where they forgot me during the holidays.

Him – Bloody hell...

Her – That's how it is. Not all the time. Sometimes there are calm periods. And then it starts all over again. On my wedding day, I thought maybe I'd finally broken the curse. That someone, at last, would remember me. But my fiancé forgot to show up at the city hall. Even the officiant forgot to come. So did my parents, actually...

Him – But you seem lovely. Not the sort of woman you'd forget...

Her – I know. I've always had a lot of success with men. And yet, I've never broken anyone's heart, I swear. That would have required them to actually remember me. But most of my boyfriends forgot to turn up for the second date.

Him – Right...

Her – You know the saying, “never on the first date”?

Him – Yes...

Her – Well in my case, if it didn't happen on the first date, by the second one I'd already been forgotten.

Him – Must've been tough.

Her – You can say that again. Take job interviews. I was always the only one there, they'd forgotten me. I did manage to get hired two or three times, but people always ended up forgetting there was someone in the office. And of course, they forgot to pay me too...

Him – And so?

Her – Since I could never hold down a job, I ended up turning to crime.

Him – Crime? But you don't look the type. How do you manage?

Her – I take whatever I want from shops and just walk out without paying.

Him – You'll end up in prison.

Her – Not likely! The security guards forget to call the police. Or the police forget to show up. Or the prison guard forgets to lock the cell, because he forgets there's anyone in it.

Him – Well, when you put it like that... I suppose it does have its upsides.

Her – When you've served me my drink, if you remember to do it, I'll leave without paying, and you won't even remember having served me.

Him – Really?

Her – I've never paid a restaurant bill in my life. And yet I eat out every day.

Him – No way... How long's this been going on?

Her – Since 1902. That's the year I was born.

Him – 1902? But that's impossible.

Her – Death must have forgotten to come for me too.

Him – I see...

Her – I'm telling you... You'll forget me too.

Pause.

Him – So then, what can I get the lady?

12. Blackouts

He is already there. She arrives.

Him – Hello. All right?

Her – All right. And you?

Him – Yeah, not bad.

Her – Bit chilly, isn't it?

Him – Yeah. Can't really say it's warm. In fact, you could say it's cold.

Her – Yes, that's exactly what I said. Using litotes.

Him – A what?

Her – *Litotes!* Saying less to imply more, if you like. Like... “I don't exactly hate you” to mean “I love you”.

Him – So “it's not warm” is litotes?

Her – Could be.

Him – And it could mean “I love you”?

The other seems a bit thrown and takes a moment to restart the conversation as best she can.

Her – I'm wondering if it isn't even colder this year than last.

Him – Oh, could well be.

Her – I remember, this time last year, I was sunbathing on the terrace.

Him – In your swimsuit? In the middle of January? Really?

She comes a bit closer.

Her – I'm sorry, I'm talking nonsense. Just filling space. I've completely forgotten my lines.

Him – Your lines?

Her – A total blank. A black hole.

Him – A black hole?

Her – Or a blank, if you prefer. I was hoping it would come back, but no. So I improvised. I'm really sorry.

Him – Sorry? What for?

Her – For forgetting my lines!

Him – But... we don't have any lines!

Her – We don't?

Him – No. Well, I don't, anyway.

Her – Are you sure? So you're improvising too?

Him – Well, yes...

Her – I thought as much. Saying things like that. So you're just talking rubbish?

Him – What do you mean, rubbish?

Her – Whatever pops into your head.

Him – Well, not *everything* that pops into my head. I filter a bit, at least.

Her – If what you're saying is the filtered version, I dread to think what got cut...

Him – So you reckon you had lines?

Her – Yes.

Him – Lines which you forgot.

Her – That's what I thought. But are you sure you're not reciting lines too?

Him – I don't know... You think I might be?

Her – Something doesn't add up.

Him – What doesn't?

Her – If you're saying lines, I can't be improvising.

Him – Why not?

Her – It just wouldn't make sense.

Him – Right, yes.

Her – Unless we're both improvising.

Him – Or we're both doing lines.

Her – But who on earth would've written such nonsense?

Him – You know what contemporary theatre's like... Maybe the writer was improvising too.

Her – Ah yes, automatic writing and all that.

Him – I thought that had gone out of fashion.

Her – What's certain is, the writer definitely had no script. At the start.

Him – So in a way, he improvised.

Her – Yes, you could say that.

Him – So why shouldn't we improvise a bit too?

Her – Actually, I'm wondering if...

Him – What?

Her – If we aren't writing the script ourselves, right now.

Him – I see. The characters improvise, and the writer just jots it all down.

Her – And he's the one who gets the royalties.

Him – Being a writer... sounds like a lazy job.

Her – I'd go further. It's plagiarism.

Him – Plagiarism?

Her – If the writer's plagiarising his own characters...

Him – Still, you said it yourself. What we're saying isn't exactly Shakespeare.

Her – No. Let's be honest.

Him – Maybe we've improvised enough now.

Her – Yes. That'll do.

Him – So?

Her – What?

Him – What were we saying before we started talking?

Blackout.

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.

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Comedies for 2

A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3

A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman,
one giant leap backward for
Mankind
The Way of Chance

Comedies for 4

A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
How to get rid of your best
friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the
audience?
Just a moment before the end of
the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore
Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police
Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more

At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police
Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana
Abbey
Music does not always soothe
the savage beasts
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not
cancelled
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Backstage Bits
Don't panic
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
For real and for fun
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lost time Chronicles
Open Hearts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air

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