

La Comédiathèque

At the Bar Counter

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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At the counter, at the time for taking stock, a woman claiming to be an author shares significant moments of her life with the bar owner. These fanciful tales come to life on stage in the bar's room.

*18 characters follow, all female in this version,
but the cast can vary greatly in number and gender.*

Two women enter the bar with some hesitation. They glance around the room and approach the counter, behind which the owner stands, stoic, wiping wine glasses.

One – What will you have?

Two – I'm not sure...

One – Red? White?

Two – White...

One – Two glasses of white wine, please.

Owner – We're out of white.

One – Well... Red, then...

Owner – Two glasses of red coming up.

The owner serves them the two glasses.

One – Let's sit down while there are still free tables.

Two – Good idea.

The two women sit at a table with their glasses. The first takes a sip and grimaces.

One – Not sure we made the right choice...

Two – About the show?

One – About the wine, at least...

The second woman sips her glass.

Two – Oh dear... Definitely not Château Margaux.

One – What exactly is this event?

Two – I wasn't too sure... (She pulls a flyer from her bag.) "Little Glasses and Great Wine." It was free. Probably a cabaret night or something...

One – Cabaret? There isn't even a stage...

Two – Maybe a one-man show?

One – Or a two-women show, who knows.

Two – You're right. For the moment, we're the only ones in the room.

One – "Little glasses and Great wine"... Let's see... (*She checks the brochure.*) Wait a minute ! It doesn't say glasses, it says verses!

Two – Verses?

One – Tiny poems! Bloody hell! It's a poetry night!

Two (*grabs the flyer and checks*) – Shit, you're right!

One – How tragic misunderstandings can arise from dyslexia...

Two – No wonder it was free...

One – Poetry... I knew it was a trap.

Two – I think it's time to make ourselves scarce...

Transition music. As the two women discreetly escape, a customer arrives. Before entering, she takes a final drag of her cigarette. The customer stands in front of the bar.

Owner – What can I get for you?

Customer – I don't know... I don't fancy anything...

Owner – Nothing? Sorry, that's not on the menu.

Customer – I just feel like throwing myself under a train.

Owner – This isn't the right place for that. This isn't a train station, love. So if you want to stay, you'll have to order something.

Customer – Fine, what do you recommend?

Owner – If you fancy it, I have house sangria.

Customer – I'm not sure... What else do you have?

Owner – A while ago, you didn't know what to have, and now you find there's not enough choice?

Customer – Well then I'll have... a beer. When you have suicidal thoughts, beer seems quite appropriate, doesn't it?

Owner – What kind of beer?

Customer – Death & Taxes

Owner – I don't do craft beer.

Customer – What do you have?

Owner – Draught beer.

Customer – What kind of draught beer?

Owner – Regular draught...

Customer – Is that all?

Owner – A moment ago, you didn't know what to have, and now you think there's not enough choice?

Customer – A regular draught will be just fine.

Owner – What people come looking for here isn't beer, you know. They have beer at home in the fridge.

Customer – You're right. They probably come here looking for a bit of human warmth...

Owner – Doesn't matter how it's served, as long as it hits.

Customer – A half-pint then. No, two...

The owner serves her two half-pints.

Owner – Here you go... Two halves...

Customer – Two halves. That makes a whole... At least that's what I learned in school...

Owner – You're a funny one, aren't you... Are you waiting for someone?

Customer – If I were waiting for my other half, I'd go sit at one of those tables and fix myself up. I wouldn't be here, standing, dishevelled, talking to myself.

Owner – Thanks.

The customer pushes the second half-pint towards the owner.

Customer – You're different. (*They clink glasses.*) A bar owner's like a shrink, a priest or a prostitute. You can tell them everything, but you can't ask them anything. Especially not if they have issues with their mother, or if they also have dark thoughts sometimes...

Owner – Do you have issues with your mother?

Customer – Do *you* ever have dark thoughts?

Owner – That's none of your business!

Customer – Ah, you see...

Owner – Did you come here looking for trouble?

Customer – I came looking for inspiration.

Owner – Oh really...?

Customer – Poets often go to bars to find inspiration. Didn't you know?

Owner (*ironically*) – Yes, of course. All my customers are poets.

Customer – They say that every day in this country, two bars close down. It was in the paper this morning.

Owner – I don't read newspapers.

Customer – But you sell them!

Owner – I sell pipes too. And I don't smoke.

Customer – Where will poets go for inspiration when all the bars have been replaced by McDonald's?

Owner – Let them go to hell.

Customer – Believe me, when fast food takes over every corner, poets will be left writing airport fiction.

Owner – Is that why you want to throw yourself under a train?

Customer – Or maybe because I'm afraid I won't find inspiration.

Owner – Do you really think it's here that you'll find something to tell?

Customer – If counters could talk, they'd have plenty to say, wouldn't they?

Owner – Sure... But I don't know who would be interested.

Customer – You know, it was in a bar like this one that I found out my exam results.

Owner – No kidding...

Customer – Exams... They're milestones in life, aren't they? Rites of passage...

Owner – I don't know... I don't even have a driver's license. I think the only licence I'll ever get is a burial one.

Customer – I could tell my life story... Or yours...?

Owner – Can you make money telling your life story? All my customers do that for free...

Customer – Money? Not much...

Owner – Peanuts?

Customer – Yes, more or less.

Owner – No, I mean... Do you want peanuts? With your two halves...

The light shifts to one of the two tables, where two young girls have sat down. The girls look through the imaginary window situated on the audience's side.

One – What are all those pigeons doing here?

Two (*distracted*) – What?

One – The pigeons! Why are they only in the city? (*The other looks preoccupied with something else.*) They're not really pets. I mean, not like dogs or cats. They're birds. They're free, they're not in cages, and they can fly. They could just leave.

Two – Where would they go?

One – I don't know. To the countryside. Why don't they just fly off to the countryside, all those pigeons?

Two – To the countryside...? There's nothing for them to peck at in the countryside...

One – They make me feel sick, just watching them.

Two (*distracted*) – Yeah...

One – Look, they're coprophiles.

Two – Huh?

One – Didn't you see what they were eating?

Two – What?

One – Dog shit...

Two (*glancing, not too interested*) – Oh... right...

One – Isn't that what they call an ecosystem?

Two – Why do they stay here eating crap when they could be eating cherries in the countryside?

One – Cherry season isn't all year round. (*Her phone rings, she answers*) Yes... Yes... Yes... Okay.

She hangs up.

Two – So?

One – They haven't posted the results yet...

Two – What if we didn't pass?

One – I'd rather not think about it... Why would we not pass?

Two – I don't know. Fear of winning. Like a show horse that refuses the jump at the last second. Happens to the best champions.

One – Wait, we're not horses. And besides, high school exams aren't a competition. It's like the driving test. Just because a lot of people pass it doesn't mean you're less likely to.

Two – Yeah well, precisely. I've already failed the driving test twice...

One – If I fail, I'm dead. My parents would kill me. They stuck me in this Catholic school because they had a 100% success rate. It costs them a full wage every month. If I don't pay them back...

Two – However, there have been years when it was 99%. So someone can fail, now and then. It's rare, but it can happen.

One – I don't know... I don't know... Maybe the guy missed his train...

The phone rings. The first answers immediately.

One – Yes... Yes... Yes... Okay...

She hangs up, her face unreadable.

Two – Well?

One – They've just released the results.

Two (*tense*) – And then?

No longer pretending, the second bursts into joy.

One – We passed! Damn it, we passed, I'm telling you!

They both hug.

Two – You shouldn't have strung me along like that. My heart's beating a hundred miles an hour.

One – You mean a hundred a minute. If it were a hundred an hour, you'd be dead already.

Two – What grade did we get?

One – Wait, it's already good news... Don't ask for a miracle. Oh god... We'll have to celebrate...

Two – Yes... Although, everyone has their high school diploma now...

One – Mmm... That's when the real trouble starts.

Two – Come on... Life is beautiful! It's summer!

They leave. Back to the counter.

Owner – So, did you pass?

Customer – Just scraped through.

Owner – Your parents must have been thrilled.

Customer – They didn't say anything, anyway.

Owner – Some people just don't talk much.

Customer – I wish, just once in my life, my parents had told me they were proud of me. Even if it wasn't true. Don't you?

Owner – What I wish is that I could have told my parents I was proud of them...

Customer – Do you have kids?

Owner – No. And I'm not sure they would have been proud of me...

Customer – Why's that?

Owner – So, your parents didn't kill you...

Customer – No. But that's when the real trouble started.

Owner – Did you struggle to find a job after finishing your studies?

Customer – I ended up finding one. A basic job, as they say.

Owner – Still better than working the streets.

Customer – Maybe... High school ends your innocence. But that first job, that's like losing your virginity. You realise you're properly screwed. You know it only hurts the first time, and you'll get used to it. But deep down, you suspect it'll take a hell of a lot of imagination to ever enjoy it... What was it like for you?

Owner – Losing my virginity?

Customer – Your first job! What did you do before going into business for yourself?

Owner – I used to work the street.

Customer – Ah... So you do know what I mean.

The light shifts to the second table, where a woman who looks like a corporate executive is sitting. A blonde girl, student-type, arrives. The woman stands up and shakes her hand.

Woman – Please, take a seat... (*A little surprised*) So, you're Miss...?

Young – Ben Salah. Fatima Ben Salah...

Woman – That's right... And... you're blonde...

Young – Yes, I know, people often mention it. Actually, it comes from my great-grandfather... But usually, it puts employers at ease. When I manage to get to the interview, of course. Is it a problem?

Woman – Not at all...

Young – The ad said you were looking for a salesperson...?

Woman – For insurance premiums, yes. We sell funeral plans. It's a very saturated market already. We're recruiting someone to canvass in the suburbs.

Young – Why not a blonde?

Woman – For door-to-door in certain neighbourhoods... we figured a blonde would... well, stir up less empathy.

Young (*handing her a sheet*) – I've got a record, you know! I mean... a CV.

Woman – You have to be very persuasive to sell this kind of product. When people don't even know how they'll pay their rent at the end of the month, they're not exactly thinking over coffee about taking out a 50-year loan to fund their final resting place...

Young – That's for sure...

Woman – We started out in publishing. That wasn't easy either. Selling a 28-volume encyclopaedia to people who, for the most part, couldn't read.

Young – Well, there are still pictures in encyclopaedias...

Woman – Then we tried a bit of supplementary health insurance. But with the competition... No, funeral plans are still what sells best today. That's where the future is.

Young – You're not sure to get sick, but you're definitely going to die. Everyone. Even the illiterate.

Woman – This isn't some kind of testing operation, is it?

Young – Sorry...?

Woman – You didn't dye your hair blonde just to accuse us of discrimination later on?

Young – Don't worry. I'm a natural blonde.

Woman – We're not racist, you know. It's just that in this case... we were planning to have you develop a new market. What we call, in our jargon, the "halal funeral plan." A booming sector. The logical result of the major immigration wave of the 1950s.

Young – I can do an Arabic accent.

Woman – You can?

Young – With a little refresher course...

Woman – Do you think it would work?

Young – If I wear a djellaba...

The woman reflects.

Woman – Well... You've convinced me. When you're applying for a sales job, you've got to start by selling yourself. And believe me, selling me a blonde wasn't easy. (*Standing*) Well done! I'm taking you on trial.

Young – Thank you.

Woman – And if it goes well, in three months, you'll get a permanent plot...

Young – Do you mean a permanent contract?

Woman (*rising with a satisfied smile*) – It's nice to see young people who still want to work!

They leave. Back to the counter.

Owner – You didn't come here to sell me a perpetual concession, did you? If so, let me know immediately. I've decided to be cremated and leave my ashes to science...

Customer – No, don't worry. Besides, I've never managed to sell a single funeral plan. To achieve that, you have to be more than just skilled, believe me. You have to have faith...

Owner – You don't believe in God?

Customer – And God, does he believe in us?

Owner – And then? Did you join a convent?

Customer – Then, I found a real job.

Owner – A blonde's job.

Customer – Exactly.

Owner – But that didn't work out either.

Customer – I don't think I was cut out for the business world.

Owner – It's immediately obvious that you're not a fighter, that's for sure.

Customer – I thought I would get used to it. Come to terms with it.

Owner – Well, I understand. I could never have a boss.

Customer – And no, I could never resign myself. Perpetual concessions really aren't my thing...

Owner – Being commanded by no one, not having anyone to command... As soon as you have employees, you're their slave.

Customer – I couldn't stand being told what to do. How to dress... or how to undress.

The light returns to one of the two tables. A woman in smart-casual business attire – blazer with jeans – is seated at a table. She opens her briefcase and pulls out a catalogue, flipping through it while sipping her coffee. Her phone rings; she answers.

Executive – Yes... Oh, really...? Yes, yes, I'll wait for them. No, no, I think I'm a bit early. What time exactly is the meeting?

Another woman arrives, clearly her boss, dressed in a full business suit. Phone glued to her ear, hyperactive energy, like she's on a sugar high or something stronger. She sits at the same table.

Manager – Ten forty-five. Do you have the visuals for the new campaign?

They both continue talking into their phones, as if not seated face-to-face.

Executive – Yes, yes, absolutely. You'll see, it's stunning...

The executive flips to another page in the catalogue. Her manager grabs it and starts looking through it herself.

Manager – Ah, yes, this is...

Executive – It's different..

Manager – Yes...

Executive – The creatives really did a good job.

Manager – For once, they actually came up with something creative.

The executive glances up and suddenly seems to register the absurdity of the situation, talking on the phone to her manager sitting right in front of her.

Executive – Would you like a coffee?

The manager finally looks up from the catalogue and acknowledges her directly.

Manager – Uh, no, thank you. I've quit coffee. It stains my teeth and makes me want to pee.

The manager now stares at her colleague with a puzzled expression, as if something about her outfit seems off. She squints slightly, trying to figure it out.

Manager – Are you... not wearing a bra?

Executive – Uh... No. Is that a problem?

Manager – No, no... Well... Don't you usually wear one?

Executive – Since it's Friday, I thought... you know... something more relaxed.

Manager – More relaxed?

Executive – You know... Friday wear, right...?

Manager – Friday wear...?

Executive – In the States, on Fridays, all executives dress like this. A bit less formal. Smart, but casual...

Manager – In the States...?

Executive – Without a bra.

Manager (*uncomfortable*) – Right...

A somewhat awkward silence.

Executive – Can I speak freely?

Manager (*a little uneasy*) – Speak freely? I'm starting to think I preferred you with a bra.

Executive – Our company has a bit of an outdated image, you know. All the surveys say so. We're seen as... out of touch. I figured, along with the new catalogue, if we embraced "Friday wear"... we'd feel a bit more... connected.

The manager looks surprised. She hesitates, then decides.

Manager – You know what... you're right.

She turns away from the audience, squirms for a moment, then turns back holding her bra.

Manager – If it's good enough for the Yankees...

The executive is a little taken aback.

Manager (*relieved*) – Ah... it does feel better... Do I look cooler like this?

Executive – Much cooler.

Manager – Next time, I'll take off my panties too...

But the manager still seems a bit worried.

Manager – Though... isn't it a bit... considering the client?

Executive – Why? What do you mean?

Manager – Well... they do sell lingerie, don't they?

Executive – Oh... Right! But still, it's only on Fridays.

The manager seems to give in.

Manager (*relaxing a bit*) – Well, I still have to take you to the client... (*Pleased with her joke*) Like the farmer takes the cow to the bull...

The executive frowns slightly, unsure whether it's a joke. They both get up to leave.

Manager – So... who exactly are we meeting?

Executive – The new CEO.

Manager – The new one?

Executive – The last one committed suicide. Last Friday. Didn't you hear?

Manager – Oh my God... No. What a horrible idea.

Executive – She hanged herself. From her office balcony. With the strap of her bra, actually...

Manager – Well... that's quality material. Must've been strong... to hold that kind of weight.

The executive looks a little disturbed by how calm her boss seems.

Manager – I'm kidding. I thought we were being chill today, weren't we?

They exit. Back to the bar.

Customer – Of course, we lost the client...

Owner – And did you put your bra back on for the next appointment?

Customer – No. I quit. I left to travel the world, and when I came back, I bought a lottery ticket.

Owner – I would have bought the ticket first.

Customer – I decided to spend my winnings in advance... Just in case I didn't win the jackpot. Have you ever been around the world?

Owner – No... And as for the Jackpot... It's like with cigarettes. I sell lottery tickets. But I don't play.

Customer – You're a seller of dreams, in a way.

Owner – And believe me, the poorer people are, the more they need to dream.

Customer – When I was little, next to my house, there was a joke shop. It was called "Children's Happiness". I passed by it every day on my way to school, I looked at the window, but I couldn't afford to go in. Very early on, I learned that if happiness is just a joke, you still need to have the means to afford it...

The light returns to one of the two tables. Two women are seated at a table. The first is staring straight ahead.

Woman 1 – What are you looking at?

Woman 2 – I'm waiting for the lottery results. They'll show them on the screen over there...

Woman 1 – You play the lottery?

Woman 2 – I felt like giving it a try.

Woman 1 – Why not...? (*Silence*) What's the jackpot?

Woman 2 – 115 million.

Woman 1 – 115 million...

Woman 2 – You're wondering what you could do with 115 million.

Woman 1 – Once you get past a certain amount, it's all meaningless anyway. Like when they say a star is 115 million light-years away — you don't stop to wonder how far that is in kilometres.

Woman 2 – Or how much fuel it would take to get there in a Ford Fiesta...

Woman 1 – What numbers did you play?

Woman 2 – My social security number.

Woman 1 – Fortune favours the bold... Imagine if we actually won.

Woman 2 – It's a bit hard to picture, honestly.

Woman 1 – No more Mondays. No more work. 365 days of holiday a year...

Woman 2 – Yes... Leaving everything behind...

Woman 1 – Everything? What would you do if you had 115 million right now? Well, 57 and a half... (*The second one looks at her.*) Wait, we're not married, are we? For better or for worse...

Woman 2 – I don't know... You win 10,000 euros, you're happy. You treat yourself a little. But it doesn't really change your life. 115 million, that's a whole different story. There's a "before" and an "after." You become someone else entirely. Like being born again. It's kind of scary, isn't it?

Woman 1 – First thing I'd do is tell my boss exactly what I think of him... then head straight to the Mercedes dealership and buy myself a car bigger than his. Winning the lottery is another way of establishing the dictatorship of the proletariat... on an individual level...

Woman 2 – Still, it must be quite a shock. Going from one day to the next with no limits to your desires. No more constraints. Just being able to do whatever you want. Anything you want...

Woman 1 – I think I could handle it.

Woman 2 – I'm not so sure... Just read the papers. So many lottery winners end up completely broke...

Woman 1 – If the worst thing that can happen after winning the lottery is going broke... then you didn't have much to lose in the first place.

Woman 2 – And then there's all the divorces... Do you think our relationship would survive it?

Silence.

Woman 1 – On second thought, I'm not sure... How do you give meaning to a billionaire's life that just lands in your lap like that, by pure chance?

Woman 2 – Do you think daughters of billionaires ask themselves those kinds of metaphysical questions?

Woman 1 – Yeah, but they were born into it. They've had time to get used to it. They don't know anything else. When you win the lottery, it's all at once. One in 20 million, can you believe it?

Woman 2 – The average number of sperm in an ejaculation is 300 million.

Woman 1 – So what?

Woman 2 – So... if we're both here, we're already incredibly lucky. Our proletarian lives also landed in our laps by chance. Let's just say the lottery is giving fate a second shot, to correct the fact we weren't born with a silver spoon in our mouths.

Woman 1 – I don't know... It scares me a bit. And it kind of suggests our current life is worthless... That it wasn't worth living. Is that what you think? Is that why you play the lottery?

Woman 2 – What are you talking about...? And anyway, it's the first time I've played. It's just for fun.

Woman 1 – Most winners are first-timers. It's called beginner's luck...

Suddenly, they both look a bit anxious.

Woman 2 (tense) – They're about to announce the results...

They stare at the screen, transfixed.

Woman 1 – Well...?

Woman 2 (checking her ticket) – Not a single number. Not even one. That's pretty rare, you know. I've forgotten most of my statistics lessons, but I wonder if the odds of getting nothing at all are almost the same as hitting the jackpot.

Woman 1 – So in a way, you could say we were lucky...

They look at each other, amused and strangely relieved. A moment of tenderness.

Woman 2 – Just think, all that happiness could've slipped through our fingers in an instant...

Woman 1 – Gives you chills, doesn't it...

Back to the counter with the owner and the customer.

Customer – I've never had much luck in life. I've never won anything, not even in a raffle. Not even in the king cake, I can't remember ever getting the lucky charm. I wasn't asking for the jackpot. A consolation prize would have been enough for me...

Owner – But you've never had any major setbacks.

Customer – That's true. I can't say I've been particularly unlucky either. A normal life, you know. No great happiness. No big tragedy. Neither a fairy tale nor a calamity. Not much trouble, but nothing very exciting either...

Owner – And yet, you ended things.

Customer – She was the one who left me.

Owner – She? *(The other doesn't respond)* Ah, I see...

Customer – We've known each other since nursery school. The classes weren't mixed back then. But I'm not sure that explains anything...

Owner – A vegetarian in a butcher's shop is still a vegetarian.

Customer – She was my first love... But childhood loves... Rarely last beyond high school or getting a driver's license...

Owner – If it's really love, it's for life, isn't it?

Customer – Childhood loves are forever... It's childhood that doesn't last.

The light returns to one of the two tables.

Two women stare off into the distance. The second is wearing a hat, with no hair visible beneath it.

One – Did you see that tree? Isn't it beautiful?

Two – Yes.

One – It's so much a part of the landscape... that we end up not seeing it anymore.

Two – Mmm...

One – It's an oak. It was already here before we were even born.

Two – How do you know? Since we weren't born...

One – We hung a swing from one of its branches when we were kids. It was already that big. Don't you remember?

Two – No.

One – I do. I broke my arm falling off that damn swing.

Two – You've broken so many things. How do you expect me to remember them all...? Once time, you even broke your ass.

One – My coccyx.

Two – Falling off a chair. Incredible. I wonder which bone you haven't broken. (*A pause*) The coccyx... I didn't even know it existed back then. And even now, I'm not sure how to spell it.

One – All I know is that it scores a lot of points in Scrabble...

Two – When I picture you as a kid, you always have a cast. Even in school photos, you've got an arm in a sling, crutches, or a big bandage. I wonder how you even made it to adulthood in one piece.

One – You never broke anything. Like that tree over there...

Two – And yet, I did just as many stupid things as you... I lived dangerously too. I've even shucked oysters at Christmas. And I never stabbed myself with the knife...

One – You've always had more luck than me. I kind of resented you for that...

Two – Do you really think I've been lucky...?

One – Yeah, go ahead, call me clumsy.

Two – Where are you going with your tree?

One – It's weathered every storm. Not a single broken branch. Just like you. In a hundred years, it'll still be standing.

Two – Even if it's standing, it might be hollow inside by now. Look, it doesn't even have a leaf left on its head. Just like me, actually.

One – That's normal. It's autumn...

Two – Ah, yes, that's true. I didn't realise summer had passed... From my hospital window, all I could see was the hypermarket parking lot.

One – The leaves will grow back in spring. You'll see.

A moment passes.

Two – And my hair? Do you think it'll grow back in spring too?

One – I'd bet my arm on it...

Back at the counter with the owner and the customer.

Owner – It's hard to see the people we love go. But you know what makes me the most sad?

Customer – No.

Owner – Seeing my neighbours grow old...

Customer – Ah, yes.

Owner – One day, we think they'll die. And others will come in their place. Young people. Young people can be noisy sometimes. You never know who you'll end up with... Anyway, we're still here. For now...

Customer – Yes. But then I thought if I didn't want to die a fool, it was now or never to try to give some meaning to what life I had left.

Owner – Did you change jobs again?

Customer – I had finally found a stable job. And I was already imagining my retirement, a few decades later...

Two women (one young and one old) are seated at separate tables. The young one pretends to work, tapping on a calculator and jotting down numbers on a sheet of paper. The old one looks aimless and idle.

Young (with a slightly forced kindness) – So, that's it? This is the last one...

Elderly – Yes...

Young – How does it feel?

Elderly – Like an old movie you've seen too many times. In the end, you don't understand it anymore...

Young – We'll miss you... Are you having a party?

Elderly – A party?

Young – A farewell party!

Elderly – Ah... I don't know... Should I...? (*The young one doesn't answer and continues working.*) You know what I'll miss the most? That slightly bitter taste of morning coffee. The day begins... and by noon, it's already over...

Young – What will you do... afterwards?

Elderly – Rest... In peace... That's what people do, I suppose...

Young – And are you staying around here, or...?

Elderly – Where else would I go...?

A puzzled look from the young woman, interrupted by her phone ringing.

Young – Yes... No... Yes, yes... No, no...

The young one hangs up and scribbles something on a piece of paper.

Elderly – Is she coming soon?

Young – Who?

Elderly – My replacement!

Young – Ah... I think Monday...

Elderly – Then I won't see her... Do you know her?

Young – No... (*A little embarrassed*) Actually, I'm the one replacing you...

Elderly (*without hostility*) – Ah, I see... Congratulations...! And then the rookie will replace you... Makes sense...

The phone rings again. The young one answers.

Young – Yes... No... Yes, yes... No, no...

Elderly – Would you like some coffee?

Young – Why not.

The elderly woman brings her a cup.

Elderly – I'll leave you the coffee maker, if you like...

Young – How long have you been here?

Elderly – Too long... (*A pause*) And you?

Young – I've just arrived...

Elderly – Planning to stay?

Young (*content*) – I'm finishing my trial period today... Tomorrow, I'll be on a permanent contract... It's automatic...

Elderly – In that case... Are you happy, then?

Young – It's fine...

They sip their coffee.

Elderly – It's good, isn't it? Not too strong?

Young – It's perfect...

Elderly – Actually, we hardly know each other. Are you married?

Young – Not yet... And you?

Elderly – No...

Young – Well... I should get back to work...

Elderly – Yes, sorry. For me, it's my last day, so I don't have much to lose. But you. Your trial period doesn't end until tonight. You'll have plenty of time to do nothing once you're permanent...

The young woman looks at her, unsure if it's a joke. Then she gets back to work. The elderly woman hums or whistles softly. The young one glances over, visibly annoyed.

Elderly – Sorry... (*The young one returns to her work.*) You can take my spot when I'm gone. The desk's a bit bigger, isn't it?

Young – Yes... That's the plan...

Elderly – Of course, silly me... And the new one will get the small desk. (*The elderly woman's idle presence distracts the young one.*) Sorry, I'll try to look busy. I should probably pack up... (*She rummages through a large bag.*) Well, when I say pack... I think everything will fit in a plastic bag. (*She chuckles, more to herself.*) Amazing, isn't it? A whole life, and in the end... we leave so little behind. (*She pauses, then looks at the young woman.*) You wouldn't happen to have a plastic bag, would you? (*The young one gives her a look to indicate she doesn't.*) And to think... I used to sit at your desk when I first came here. (*She smiles wistfully.*) Do you know what I used to dream about back then? (*The young woman shakes her head.*) Writing... (Pause) Not reports, not filling out forms like I've done all my life... I mean really writing. (*She looks away.*) I thought if I got myself a quiet little job, I'd have time to start. (Pause) And then... the years passed. And I never got around to it...

Young – Now you'll have time...

Elderly – Yes. An eternity... But time for what? To tell my life story? I already told you. It would fit in a small plastic bag...

The phone rings.

Young – Yes... No...

Elderly – Maybe even in a condom...

Young – Yes, yes... No, no... (*She hangs up.*) You were saying...?

Elderly – Nothing...

Young – You know what I was thinking...?

Elderly (*hopefully*) – No...?

Young – What if I used this opportunity to ask for carpet?

Elderly (*surprised*) – Carpet?

Young – So we don't disturb the people below. Hardwood floors look great, but... they creak.

Elderly – Have the neighbours downstairs complained?

Young – No... But there's quite a bit of coming and going here...

Elderly – I'm going to live downstairs.

Young – Oh, really...?

Elderly – One's got to live somewhere. It's a bit dark, but... I know the neighbourhood... I won't feel lost.

Young – And hearing us walk around up here all day... that won't bother you?

Elderly – It'll be a distraction... I'll think: they're working up there while I... can stay in bed all day...

Young – Well... No carpet, then...

The young woman returns to work.

Elderly – And your dreams?

Young – My dreams?

Elderly – You're young. You must still have some. If you hit the jackpot, what would you do?

Young – I'd take a vacation, I guess...

Elderly – And after that?

Young – Maybe I'd start my own business.

Elderly – To...?

Young – So I wouldn't have a boss!

Elderly – Starting a business just to avoid having a boss... Might as well not work at all... It's simpler, isn't it?

Young – Yes, maybe... (*Phone rings*) No... Yes, yes... No, no... (*She hangs up*) Now, where was I...

Elderly – Go...

Young – Sorry?

Elderly – Go! While you still can!

Young – Go where?

Elderly – You're what, twenty? Do you really want to end up like me?

Young – I've got to make a living... What do you suggest...

Elderly (*after a beat*) – Nothing... You're right...

The young woman returns to work.

Young – You know what I think?

Elderly – No...

Young – They're going to shut the company down.

Elderly – What do you mean, shut it down?

Young – Do you even know what we manufacture here...?

Elderly – No...

Young – You worked here your whole life, and you don't know what we produce?

Elderly – I think I knew at the beginning... But it's changed so much. We've been bought out at least ten times. I didn't even realise we still made anything... What do we make, exactly?

Young – Urns!

Elderly – Urns?

Young – The market is collapsing.

Elderly – Due to abstention...?

Young – Funeral urns!

Elderly – Ah...

Young – the baby boomer boom has passed...

Elderly – Is it that bad?

Young – They're going to shut the company down... and open another.

Elderly – Relocating?

Young – Not even. We'll probably keep the same building.

Elderly – And the staff?

Young – Aside from natural departures, like yours, they'll likely just reassign everyone. Might even do some rehiring... We just need to change the company name and start making something else. Lots of options...

Elderly – So what really changes?

Young – Honestly? Not much.

The young woman returns to work. The elderly woman stays lost in thought.

Elderly – There's really no way to stop any of it, is there...

Young – Stop what?

Elderly – I don't know... To be honest, I think if we went on strike, no one upstairs would even notice...

Young – You're quite unique...

Elderly – Yes... A unique old woman... Funny, isn't it? You never hear anyone say a young person is unique. It's normal to be unique when you're young... It's tolerated... Even encouraged... It's practically hygienic. But once you're older... it's supposed to wear off. Red hair, nose rings... by thirty, it's old-fashioned. So over fifty, it's borderline suspect... You know what growing old feels like? It's not knowing how to reinvent your life every morning, past coffee time... In the end, we die from a lack of imagination. You're not really a nose-ring type, are you?

Young – Do you have children?

Elderly – No...

Young – Would you have liked to?

Elderly – Why?

Young – So you wouldn't grow old alone, for example.

Elderly – I have neighbours. They're growing old with me.

Young – Talking to you is kind of depressing...

Elderly (*amused*) – You think so...?

Young – It's not that bad.

Elderly – That I'm depressing?

Young – Maybe you expect too much.

Elderly – Yes... That's what they told me upstairs the last time I dared to ask for a raise...

Young – How long ago was that...?

Elderly – I don't remember...

Young – There's no one left up there... You didn't know?

Elderly – What do you mean, no one left...?

Young – We've been bought out by pension funds.

Elderly – You mean... retirees?

Young – Their widows, mostly.

Elderly – So when I leave, I'll be the boss of my own company?

Young – Pretty much, yes... See? No need to play the lottery. Just wait.

The elderly woman, devastated, remains silent.

Elderly – If I organise a farewell party, will you come?

Young – Why not? Send me a death notice...

In the distance, the wail of a siren is heard.

Elderly – It's time... I have to go... (*She starts to leave.*) For years, when I heard the noon siren, I'd instinctively run to the shelters... Even though I never lived through the war. But the bombs never came. So I just went to lunch... (*She turns back to the young woman one last time.*) I'll leave you my meal vouchers...

She leaves. The young woman follows shortly after. Back to the counter with the owner and the customer.

Customer – No, I really couldn't see myself ending up like that. So I quit...

Owner – Again? You're the unstable type!

Customer – I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do with my life. But I knew what I didn't want to do anymore...

Owner – That's a bit like what I thought when I stopped hooking. Anyway, I couldn't make ends meet anymore.

Customer – Making ends meet...?

Owner – Everyone talks about the Polish plumber, but the Czech prostitute did us a lot of harm too... So I had the idea to take over this bar.

Customer – That was when I thought about starting to write...

Owner – Is that a job?

Customer – Telling stories, I wonder if that isn't the oldest job in the world...

Light on a table where a woman is seated. No drink in front of her. Another woman arrives.

One (standing) – Ah, you came...

Two – Did I really have a choice?

They hesitate awkwardly, almost go in for a hug, but think better of it. They sit down.

One – Would you like something?

Two – I ordered a coffee.

One – Even though we know we're not here forever... it still hits you.

Two – At his age... we knew he was on borrowed time, right?

One – Apparently, it happened in his sleep.

Two – Oh, I see...?

One – At least he didn't suffer... Didn't even know he was going.

Two – A good death, as they say... Doesn't replace a good life, but it's better than nothing.

One – He always did as he pleased...

Two – Is that enough for a good life...?

One – It was a different time.

Two – Yes...

An uncomfortable silence. The second woman gets up.

Two – I'll go see what's happened to my coffee... Seems they've forgotten me. Do you want anything else?

One – They haven't brought what I ordered either...

Two approaches the bar, disappearing into the shadows. One touches up her makeup. Two returns with two coffees.

Two – They were ready, but they forgot to bring them to us...

One – I hope it's still hot...

Two (*taking a sip*) – Strong, at least... It could wake the dead.

The other looks at her, unsure whether to laugh or be shocked.

One – We didn't even get to say goodbye.

Two – Say goodbye?

One – Bid farewell, if you prefer...

Two – I'm not sure what I prefer, but all right...

One – Still... If only we had known...

Two – Even if we had known the exact date and time... between us, would it really have changed anything?

One – We could have said one last word to him...

Two – One last word? Like what, for example?

One – I don't know...

Two – Personally, I'm not sure the last thing I'd have said to him would've brought much comfort...

One – No use dwelling on the past now that he's gone...

Two – You're right... Let's look resolutely to the future... So, what do we do with the body?

One – You talk as if we were the ones who killed him...

Two – I was thinking about cremation...

One – Do you think that's what he would have wanted?

Two – Well... I don't recall ever having that kind of conversation with him. Actually, I don't recall ever having a proper conversation with him at all... And you?

One – No, neither do I...

Two – In that case, it's up to us. Personally, I've never been a fan of the whole mausoleum business, unless you're a national hero. We're not going to embalm him like Stalin... And I've no intention of traipsing to the cemetery every All Saints' Day with a bunch of chrysanthemums.

One – I don't know...

Two – I'm just saying how I feel... But if you'd enjoy visiting his grave once a year to lay a few flowers... If you think it's better to invest in stone, we'll go with that.

A beat.

One – And what would we do with the ashes?

Two – We split them. It's all he ever left us.

One – We can't do that...

Two – If you'd rather scatter the whole lot in your garden between the barbecue and the pool, I'm happy to hand over my share. No worries.

Silence.

One – How can you be so harsh...?

Emotion overtakes her.

Two – The real question is... how did we end up like this?

One – Well... It is what it is... No one's to blame...

Two – Someone's always to blame, surely!

One – It's too late anyway.

Silence.

One – And you... how are you?

Two – I'm fine.

One – That's all?

Two – It would take too long to explain...

Her phone rings, she answers.

Two – Yes... Oh, it's you... No, no... Yes, yes, but... Listen, I'm in a meeting right now. Well... more like a family reunion. Actually, not really a party either, I'll explain. Can I call you back later? Right, talk soon... You too...

She hangs up her phone.

Two – Sorry... And you, how are you?

One – It's been so long... I don't even know where to begin...

The other's phone rings again.

Two – Sorry... (*She answers.*) Yes? Okay. No, no, it's fine. Really? But I told you to... Alright, I'll be there in an hour.

She puts her phone away .

Two – I'm really sorry... What were we talking about?

One – Doesn't matter.

Two – Look, honestly, if you can manage it... I just can't right now... Do what you think is best. I'm fine with that. And of course, we'll split the costs...

She stands up.

Two – I really have to go now... I hadn't planned on this... But let's have lunch sometime soon?

One – Why not.

She starts to take a banknote from her purse to pay.

Two – Leave it, I'll pay on my way out. You have my number, keep me posted?

One – Okay...

This time they awkwardly kiss each other. The second one leaves. The first sits back down and finishes her coffee.

Two – And now it's cold...

Back at the counter.

Customer – I buried my father this afternoon...

Owner (*concerned*) – Buried?

Customer – Yes, well... It's not like I smashed his skull with a shovel and dug the hole myself... It was a perfectly official ceremony... Very proper. I mean, it was his funeral, you know...

Owner – Oh, damn...

Customer – I didn't have to take care of anything. He had taken out a funeral plan. It's very well done these days. I got the announcement straight to my inbox and I picked the wreath from the florist's website they linked to.

Owner – It must have affected you.

Customer – I don't know... I was rather relieved, actually... He was 98 years old... After a while, I started to believe he would never die... Or that I would die before him... Isn't it strange to die before your parents? Anyway... I didn't cry.

Owner – Just because you don't cry doesn't mean you're not grieving. (*Sententious*) The greatest pains are silent...

Customer – The only time I saw my father cry was when his dog died...

Owner – Animals never disappoint you.

Customer – That's probably why he left half of his estate to the animal shelter. I think if he could have taken his dog and all his money with him to his grave, like Tutankhamun, he would have. Just to make sure he wouldn't miss anything on the other side. Not even company...

Owner – You're depressing me with your stories... Want another drink? My treat.

The owner refills both glasses.

Owner – I don't know... Have you ever tried talking to your parents?

Customer – I wrote a letter to my mother once, telling her she couldn't do anything against me anymore. But unfortunately, she couldn't do anything for me either...

Owner – Oh, I see... That's a start... Did she reply?

Customer – I never sent the letter. There comes a point in life where you have to give up on the big explanation with your parents. Accept leaving each other not really as good friends... To remain on a misunderstanding... But even that's not always easy...

Owner – I don't know... I never knew my parents...

Customer – You don't know how lucky you are... Family is a boulevard tragedy... The roles are assigned in advance, and at every reunion, the same play is performed... No one dares change their lines, wouldn't want to throw off the others. And for fear of being scolded by the director.

Owner – The director...

Customer – Well, now I can do whatever I want... No partner. No parents. No boss. Finally, I'll be able to write my life...

Owner – I don't want to upset you, but... do you really think anyone would be interested? I don't know... If you were a singing star, a weather presenter, or a footballer's wife...

Customer – I'm not talking about writing my memoirs, you know? I never understood all those people who spend half their lives reading their ancestors' memoirs, and the other half writing theirs. Forgetting to live in between.

Owner – Crying over a good old time they wouldn't want to relive for anything in the world.

Customer – Jumping from birthdays to commemorations before going on pilgrimage vacations.

Owner – Spending their Sundays placing flowers on the graves of people they hated when they were alive.

Customer – No, I want to turn my life into a novel.

Owner – Oh, I see, quite ambitious.

Customer – Even if it's just a pulp novel...

She downs the rest of her beer and gets ready to leave.

Customer – I must have been ten. One evening, I started to have a nosebleed. It wouldn't stop. I was staring at the blood-red dishcloth... My father was watching TV.

Owner – And then?

Customer – My mother finally told him it might be better to take me to the hospital. But I always wondered what was so fascinating on TV that night that he didn't even notice his daughter bleeding out.

The owner goes back to cleaning glasses.

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:

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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