

La Comédiathèque

# *At the Bar Counter*

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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# At the bar counter

**Jean-Pierre Martinez**

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.

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

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# 1. Poetry Night

*Two women enter the café with some hesitation. They glance around the room and approach the bar, 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...

*Black.*

## 2. Two Halves

*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...

### 3. The Pigeons

*A bar. A table where two teenage girls are seated. Both are looking out the window toward the audience.*

**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.*

## 4. Barely Passed

*At the bar the owner and a customer.*

**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.

## 5. Job Interview

*A bar. At a table sits a woman who looks like a corporate executive. 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.*

## 6. Friday Wear

*A bar. 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.*

## 7. Fear of Winning

*A bar. 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...

*Black.*

## 8. The Cockey

*A bar. 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 cocky.

**Two** – Falling off a chair. Incredible. I wonder which bone you haven't broken. (*A pause*) The cocky... 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...

*Black.*

## 9. Like an Old Film

*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** – he 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, t'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...

*Black.*

## 10. A Beautiful Death

*A bar. 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...

**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 13<sup>th</sup>  
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 13<sup>th</sup>  
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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