

La Comédiathèque



HANDLE WITH CARE

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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Fragile, handle with care

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

After yet another break-up, Fred has sworn to his best friend that no woman will spend the night at his flat before the end of the year. A few months later, he is about to win the bet – and the sizeable sum at stake. But on Christmas Eve, you never know what might turn up on your doorstep...

Characters

Fred
Natacha
Sam

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Scene 1

A modest one-bedroom flat. A sofa at the back, with a coffee table in front of it. A few moving boxes and a chair to one side. The front doorbell rings. Fred enters in a dressing gown.

Fred – All right, I'm coming... *(He crosses to the door and returns with Sam.)* Hi, Sam. Sorry about the dressing gown. I haven't had time to get dressed...

Sam – Hi, Fred! Sorry to turn up out of the blue. I was in the neighbourhood...

Fred – No, I'm glad you did. We haven't seen each other for ages, have we?

Sam – Not since your last move...

Fred – That's right... Coffee? Or something else?

Sam – No, thanks. I can only stay five minutes...

Fred – So, how are things?

Sam – Brilliant. I'm up to my eyes in auditions for my new play. But I think I've finally found the actress I need. She's really good...

Fred – Really good? You mean...?

Sam – As an actress, of course! Mind you, she's gorgeous too, but...

Fred – Now that sounds more like you...

Sam – In the play, she has to seduce a man who's taken a vow of chastity. So if it's going to be believable, she's got to be irresistible.

Fred – And I suppose you're playing the man she has to seduce.

Sam – I wrote the play, I'm an actor... Why would I give the leading role to someone else?

Fred – And what's it called?

Sam – Fragile – Handle with Care! By the way, can I count on you to design the poster?

Fred – Of course. For nothing, as usual?

Sam – What's the point of having a graphic designer for a mate otherwise? *(He takes an envelope from his pocket and hands it to Fred.)* Here, I've brought you some material. No synopsis yet, I'm afraid. I haven't written the ending...

Fred – You'll still have to tell me what it's about if I'm doing the poster. *(He puts the envelope on the coffee table.)* When you say this bloke has taken a vow of chastity... is he a priest?

Sam – Not exactly. I'll explain later. What about you? How's life?

Fred – Swimmably...

Sam – Swimmingly?

Fred – I was in the bath, actually...

Sam – Come on, you can tell me. I'm your best mate, aren't I?

Fred – Yeah...

Sam – Still thinking about Justine, are you?

Fred – You don't just forget three months of living together.

Sam – Look on the bright side. You've never managed to keep a woman for more than three months. Imagine how much worse it could be...

Fred – Thanks. You're a great comfort...

Sam – Listen, Fred. You've got to pull yourself together. You can't move house every time someone dumps you! I can't keep up. That's the fourth time this year!

Fred – Don't exaggerate. It's only the third...

Sam – Yes, but it's only the first of October.

Fred – I can't help it. Everything here reminds me of Justine. I can still picture her knickers drying on the balcony... I can smell her everywhere...

Sam – Smell her? How long ago did she leave?

Fred – Three weeks...

Sam – Blimey. She must have had quite a persistent smell... (*He sniffs the air.*) I can't smell a thing.

Fred – I mean her scent. Her perfume, if you like...

Sam – Give the place a good scrub with bleach.

Fred – Bleach? I'm not like you. I'm a romantic...

Sam – If being romantic means getting dumped four times a year, I'm quite happy as I am.

Fred – A serial womaniser, you mean.

Sam – Want to know how to avoid getting dumped every three months?

Fred – No.

Sam – Dump them after one month.

Fred – Thank you. That's a tremendous help... But I've made a different decision. I'd like to stay in my next flat for longer than three months.

Sam – Oh, yes? What decision?

Fred – I swear no woman will spend the night at my place between now and the end of the year.

Sam – You're joking!

Fred – I'm not.

Sam – You won't last three months. You can't bear to live alone for more than a week! That's why you always fall for the first woman who decides to move in.

Fred – Want to bet?

Sam – All right. How much?

Fred – Three months' rent. Say 3,000 euros.

Sam – So if a woman spends even one night at your place before the end of the year, you owe me 3,000 euros?

Fred – And if I win, you owe me the same.

Sam – Fine. You're on.

Fred – Are you sure?

Sam – Absolutely. I could do with the money, actually.

Fred – Don't be too sure of yourself. I'm determined. The new flat I've found is fantastic. Bigger than this one, in a much better location, and the rent's the same. I intend to stay there a while. Speaking of which, can you help me move? Next Sunday.

Sam – Help you move? Yes, yes, of course...

Fred – After all, what's the point of having a strong mate who can drive a van?

Sam – Bloody hell, Fred. Three moves in one year! That's why I suggested the bleach. Get rid of the smell of your exes and you can stay put.

Fred – Don't worry. I've made up my mind this time, and I'm sticking to it.

Sam – You're not going to become a monk, are you?

Fred – If I meet someone, we can always go to a hotel.

Sam – You? Mr Romantic? Taking women to hotels for a quick shag?

Fred – All right, let me make the terms clear. No woman will sleep in my new flat before the end of the year... unless she's the one, of course, and I marry her.

Sam – I'm telling you, you won't last three weeks... (*He looks at his watch.*) Anyway, I'd better go. I've got a date... with that actress, as it happens.

Fred – It's a hard life you lead. See you Sunday.

Sam – Sunday it is...

Sam exits.

Blackout.

Scene 2

The living room of another, similar flat. The same sofa and coffee table. On one side is a box large enough to hold a fridge, marked THIS WAY UP, FRAGILE and HANDLE WITH CARE. On the other side stands a decorated Christmas tree, with presents underneath. The doorbell rings. Fred enters, fully dressed, opens the front door and returns with Sam.

Fred – Hi, mate.

Sam – Still living out of boxes? You've been here nearly three months!

Fred – Oh, no. That's my new fridge. It's just been delivered.

Sam – Right...

Fred – The old one didn't survive the move, remember? You dropped it down the stairs when we got here.

Sam – If you're not happy with my services, hire a professional.

Fred – We found it two floors down. Without the door.

Sam – Yes, a fridge is definitely less useful without a door.

Fred – In summer you can just about manage, if you haven't got air conditioning. But in winter...

Sam – It must be particularly annoying at night. With the light on all the time.

Fred – Exactly. That's why I ordered a new one.

Sam – Anyway, how are you keeping?

Fred – Fine...

Sam – I'm not interrupting anything, am I? You're on your own?

Fred – Yes, yes. Still on my own. Don't worry.

Sam – Good...

Fred – Come to find out whether I'd prefer cash or a cheque?

Sam – Hang on! It's only Christmas Eve. There's a whole week to go. And we said New Year's Eve counts as well, remember?

Fred – That's fine by me.

Sam – Every New Year's Eve since I've known you, you've brought some drunk woman home. She moves in for a few weeks, then dumps you. Remember?

Fred – I've managed nearly three months of celibacy. I can manage another week.

Sam – Celibacy, is it? Sounds like an alcoholic promising never to drink again.

Fred – We'll see on the first of January. What about your new play?

Sam – Going brilliantly. And thanks for the poster, by the way.

Fred – It might have been easier if you'd told me what the play was about, instead of just giving me the title...

Sam – It's a comedy thriller. I didn't want to give away any spoilers.

Fred – Spoilers?

Sam – Giving the plot away. You know, telling someone what happens before they've seen it. Haven't you heard of spoilers?

Fred – No.

Sam – Anyway, not now. You're coming to the opening night on New Year's Eve, obviously. Afterwards there's a party at mine for the whole company. Loads of women...

Fred – Ah. Now I see what you're up to...

Sam – What?

Fred – It's a trap! You get me drunk, push one of your actress friends into my arms, she takes me home paralytic, and you win the bet!

Sam – Fred, I'm hurt. Do you really think I'd do that to my best friend? Just to win 3,000 euros?

Fred – To win it, perhaps not. To avoid losing it, definitely.

Sam – Come on! You can't spend New Year's Eve all on your own just because of a stupid bet.

Fred – Oh yes, I can. A bet's a bet. I'm shutting myself away this year, and I won't come out until midday on the first of January.

Sam – You're mad. It's becoming an obsession.

Fred – Three thousand euros, remember.

Sam – Fine. What are you doing for Christmas tonight, then?

Fred – My parents are away. They've treated themselves to a trip to the tropics for their wedding anniversary. I'll have a turkey on my own at home.

Sam – A turkey?

Fred – I've put a few presents under the tree. I'll open them tomorrow morning. I can't wait to find out what's in them. I've really spoilt myself, with the 3,000 euros you're going to give me.

Sam – You really are a hopeless case.

Fred turns towards the enormous box.

Fred – Speaking of presents, I'd better unpack my new fridge.

Sam – I'd better leave you to it, then.

Fred – Oh, and thanks.

Sam – For what?

Fred – You were the one who told me about this fridge, weren't you? It was a bargain. And they've delivered it within forty-eight hours, just like the advert promised.

Sam – Right. I'd better dash. I'm already late for rehearsal... Merry Christmas, old man. Just you and your new fridge.

Fred – Merry Christmas to you too. Don't overdo it.

Sam – See you, Fred.

Fred – Come round for a drink on the first of January. And don't forget your chequebook.

Sam exits. Fred looks at the enormous box.

Fred – Where the hell did I put those scissors?

He leaves and returns with a pair of scissors. Whistling, he cuts through the tape sealing the top of the box. Before opening the flaps, he turns to put the scissors on the coffee table. He turns back towards the box just as a woman's head and shoulders shoot up out of it like a jack-in-the-box. He lets out a scream and falls backwards on to the sofa.

Fred – Aaaah!

The woman screams too, startled by the sight and sound of him.

Natacha – Aaaah!

Fred – What the...?

She climbs right out of the box. She is attractive and looks every bit as frightened as he does.

Natacha (with a Russian-sounding accent) – Oh, my God! Where am I?

Fred – Where?

Natacha – And who are you?

Fred – You're in my flat! I think I should be asking you that!

Natacha – I'm sorry... My name is Natacha.

Fred – Natacha?

Natacha – Natacha. And you?

She offers him her hand and a disarming smile. He hesitates, then shakes it.

Fred – Fred...

Natacha – I'm terribly sorry to arrive like this, but...

Fred – Are you completely mad? You nearly gave me a heart attack!

Natacha looks around her.

Natacha – This is France, isn't it?

Fred – Yes, it's France! But what the hell are you doing in that box? And who gave you permission to come into my flat?

Natacha – Please, listen...

Fred – Were you going to burgle me? (*He takes out his mobile.*) I'm calling the police, I warn you.

Natacha – Please don't! I can explain everything...

He hesitates, then pockets his phone.

Fred – I don't want an explanation! All right, I won't call the police, but you're getting out of here. Now!

Natacha – Tak, tak...

Fred – Tack tack?

Natacha – Tak! It means yes in Belarusian. All right, I'll go...

She makes as if to leave.

Fred – Hang on! Where's my fridge?

Natacha – Your fridge?

Fred – My fridge! The one that was supposed to be in that box! What have you done with it? You're not leaving until you've given it back!

Natacha – Your fridge... is still in Belarus.

Fred – What? Where?

Natacha – Belarus! Please, let me explain...

Fred collapses on to the sofa.

Fred – Go on, then. I'm listening...

Natacha – My name's Natacha. I'm from Belarus, and I escaped from my country inside this box, which was supposed to contain your fridge.

Fred – Belarus? What was my fridge doing in Belarus?

Natacha – That's where they're made! A friend of mine works in the factory. He hid me in the box... and here I am.

Fred – And my fridge?

Natacha – Still there. In Minsk.

Fred – Minsk?

Natacha – Minsk! The capital of Belarus!

Fred – Minsk... Unbelievable. And who's going to refund me for my fridge? You?

Natacha – When I've gone, you can make a complaint. I'm sure they'll send you another one...

Fred – And you've come all the way from Russia in that box?

Natacha – Not Russia. Belarus!

Fred – Yes, well, same difference...

Natacha – No! It's not the same at all!

Fred – And you expect me to believe this ridiculous story?

Natacha – But it's true, I swear!

Fred – How did the box get here? By ship?

Natacha – Not by ship! Belarus doesn't have a coastline.

Fred – Really? No sea? No wonder nobody goes there on holiday. So how did the fridge get here? I mean, you, in the box?

Natacha – By lorry!

Fred – Lorry?

Natacha – Forty-eight hours, door to door! Just like the advert...

Fred – Why didn't you fly here like everyone else, with a visa?

Natacha – Belarus is a dictatorship. You can't simply leave whenever you like. And France doesn't issue visas so easily.

Fred – Well, couldn't you just have stayed in Belarus?

Natacha – Impossible! The police are after me...

Fred – Don't tell me you've murdered someone!

Natacha – The secret police have me down as an opponent of the regime. I had to get out immediately. Otherwise they'd have thrown me in prison. Or worse...

Fred – Look, I don't know what to say. But you are here illegally, and you can't stay in my flat.

Natacha – Perhaps you could hide me... just for a few days.

Fred – Hide you? I can't! I'd be helping someone with no papers to stay here illegally. I'd be the one ending up in prison!

Natacha – I'm begging you. If they send me back, they'll kill me.

Fred – Then you should go to the police. They'll tell you what to do. If you're a political refugee, you can apply for asylum and they'll sort out your papers.

Natacha – They'll put me straight on the next plane back to Belarus. And there, I won't get a trial...

Fred – I understand, but what am I supposed to do?

Natacha – One night! Just one night. I'll leave tomorrow. Nobody need ever know I spent a night with you.

Fred – With me?

Natacha – I mean, at your place... *(He hesitates.)* So, is that a yes?

Fred – It's just that I promised...

Natacha – You've got a fiancée, is that it?

Fred – No! That's just it, I... Oh, all right. One night, but no more.

She throws her arms round his neck and kisses him on the mouth.

Natacha – Thank you! Thank you!

Fred – All right, but you don't have to kiss me on the mouth, you know.

Natacha – That's how we kiss in Belarus!

Fred – Right. Just like in Russia, then... *(He turns to the box.)* But how did you survive two days shut up in there? All the way from Moscow...

Natacha – Minsk!

Fred – Yes, yes. You're not a fridge, you know!

Natacha – Look, it says FRAGILE and HANDLE WITH CARE.

Fred – Without eating or drinking?

Natacha – I had some water, but it's true. I haven't eaten a thing for forty-eight hours...

Fred – I'd offer to see what there is in the fridge, only...

Natacha – I am so sorry...

Fred – I'm on my own. I hadn't planned anything special for Christmas Eve. I thought I'd order something, but... what does a Belarusian woman eat? Do you like sushi?

Natacha – Sorry?

Fred – You should be, after the trouble you've caused me... No, I said sushi!

Natacha – Sushi? I don't know... What is it?

He gives her a puzzled look.

Blackout.

Scene 3

Fred and Natacha are sitting by the coffee table, finishing the tacos Fred has ordered in. Her jacket is draped over the back of a chair.

Fred – Well? What do you think of the tacos?

Natacha – I thought we were having sushi.

Fred – Yes... Well, nobody answered at the sushi place. They must be closed for Christmas. Mind you, who else would order sushi on Christmas Eve? With a Belarusian woman who's just popped out of a fridge box...

Natacha – Are tacos the traditional Christmas dinner in France?

Fred – Not exactly. I couldn't get a turkey delivered, either. Well... not unless I count you.

Natacha – What is sushi, anyway?

Fred – Sort of like tacos, only cold... with raw fish in the middle.

Natacha – These tacos are delicious. Thank you so much. *(She gets up and kisses him on the mouth again.)* You're a darling...

He is clearly flustered.

Fred – I haven't got any vodka, but... would you like to try tequila?

He fills her glass.

Natacha – Another French speciality?

He raises his glass to hers.

Fred – Merry Christmas!

Before they can drink, the doorbell rings.

Natacha – Are you expecting someone?

Fred – No... It must be Sam. *(Suddenly alarmed.)* Could you wait in the bedroom for a moment?

Still holding her glass of tequila, she is ushered into the bedroom. Fred opens the front door and returns with Sam.

Fred *(uncomfortable)* – Hi, Sam. How are you?

Sam – Fine. You all right? You look a bit odd...

Fred – Me? Not at all.

Sam – Listen, I've been thinking. This whole bet is ridiculous. You can't spend Christmas Eve alone here eating sushi...

Fred – Tacos, actually.

Sam – What I mean is, why not spend Christmas Eve with my parents and me? You've known us so long you're practically one of the family.

Fred – That's very kind, but... no, really.

Sam – Don't worry, there'll be no danger of you bringing a woman home. My sister's married with three kids. The only unattached woman in the family is my grandmother. Her husband's been dead for three years...

Fred – Tempting as that sounds...

Sam turns his back to Fred. A cough is heard from the bedroom.

Sam – You're not alone, are you?

Fred – Of course I am!

Sam – I heard someone cough.

Fred – No, that was... *(He forces himself to cough.)* Me. The tequila. I'm not used to it. Strong stuff, that... Want some?

Sam *(suspiciously)* – No, thanks. I'm driving.

Fred – Of course...

Sam – You'd tell me if you had someone here. A bet's a bet.

Fred – Obviously...

Sam – Then come and spend Christmas with us!

Fred – Thanks, Sam. Really. But... I need some time to myself. To think things through.

Sam – All right. Ring me if you change your mind?

Fred – Will do. Merry Christmas. And give your grandmother a kiss from me.

Sam exits. Fred fetches Natacha from the bedroom.

Natacha – Tequila's strong. Even stronger than vodka!

Fred – Yes...

Natacha – Was that your boyfriend? Is he jealous?

Fred – My boyfriend? Of course not!

Natacha – Homosexuality is forbidden in Belarus. People are put in prison for it. And in the street... they get beaten up.

Fred – But I'm not gay!

Natacha – You don't like gay people?

Fred – No! I mean yes! Of course I like gay people, but...

Natacha – So you like gay people... Is your friend gay as well?

Fred – Look, nobody's gay, all right? All I'm asking is that you don't tell anyone you slept with me. I mean... at my place. It's a long story, but it really matters to me.

Natacha – Of course. I'd hate to get you into trouble with your boyfriend.

Fred – Right. I think we'd better go to bed.

Natacha – To bed?

Fred – Yes. I've only got one bed, so you can have the bedroom and I'll sleep on the sofa.

Natacha – Certainly not! I'm not taking your bed!

Fred – You've spent the past two days sleeping in a box...

Natacha – I'll take the sofa. It'll be more comfortable than sleeping standing up in a box, I promise.

Fred – All right, then... Good night.

Natacha – Good night.

Fred exits. Natacha waits a moment, takes out her mobile phone and speaks without the slightest foreign accent.

Natacha – Sam? It's all right. I'm staying the night...

Sam (*voice off*) – Brilliant! I've won the bet!

Natacha – Don't forget our deal. I want half: 1,500 euros.

Sam (*voice off*) – You'll get it. I promise.

Natacha – The things you make me do...

Sam (*voice off*) – I cast you in my play because I knew you were a good actress. And you're playing this part perfectly.

Natacha – Yes, but I feel a bit guilty. Your mate's really rather sweet. A bit gullible, but... a decent bloke.

Sam (*voice off*) – Don't tell me you're falling for him!

Natacha – Of course not!

Fred comes back with a towel and overhears the last words of the conversation. She hastily puts away her phone.

Fred – You've got a mobile?

Natacha (*without an accent*) – Of course! We may not have sushi and tacos in Belarus, but we do have fridges and mobile phones.

Fred – What happened to your Russian accent?

Natacha is caught off guard.

Natacha – My Russian accent?

Fred – You had a Russian accent earlier.

Natacha makes an effort to recover it.

Natacha – You mean... my Belarusian accent?

Fred – Whatever. But you didn't have an accent when you were on the phone.

Natacha – I only have an accent when I'm... very nervous.

Fred – And now you're nervous again?

Natacha – Maybe you're the one who makes me nervous...

Fred – By the way, where did you learn to speak so well? Accent or no accent?

Natacha – At the Alliance Française in Minsk.

Fred – And you've never been to France before?

Natacha – Never.

Fred – Amazing. I did German for seven years at school and I've been to Germany half a dozen times. I still couldn't order sauerkraut in Munich during Oktoberfest.

Natacha – I've always had a gift for languages.

Fred – I can see that. So, if you don't mind my asking, who were you talking to?

Natacha – My friend back in Belarus.

Fred – When you say your friend...?

Natacha – The man who packed me up.

Fred – Packed you up?

Natacha – In the box, instead of your fridge! He wanted to know I'd arrived safely. That I was all right. That I'd had a good journey...

Fred – Of course... *(They smile at each other. There is an obvious attraction between them, but he resists it.)* Funny, though...

Natacha – What is?

Fred – I'm sure I've seen you somewhere before.

Natacha – Perhaps in a magazine? I was a model in Belarus. I posed for magazines...

Fred – What sort of magazines?

Natacha *(suggestively)* – Perhaps the sort you read from time to time... when nobody's looking.

Fred – But I thought you were involved in politics.

Natacha – You can be a model and still be involved in politics.

A slightly awkward silence.

Fred – I brought you a towel... and a toothbrush.

Natacha – Thank you.

Fred – Well, then... good night.

Natacha – Good night.

Fred exits. She takes her phone out again and calls Sam.

Natacha *(quietly)* – Right. You've won your bet. That's enough. I'm leaving first thing tomorrow.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Hang on! Not so fast. Now you've got to finish the job.

Natacha – Finish the job? Are you joking? I agreed to spend the night at his place, nothing more. Who do you take me for?

Sam *(on the phone)* – Don't you fancy him?

Natacha – That's not the point! I'm an actress, not a prostitute!

Sam *(on the phone)* – No need to be so dramatic...

Natacha – Sleeping with a man for 1,500 euros – what would you call that?

Sam *(on the phone)* – A very expensive one.

Natacha – Oh, fuck off!

Sam *(on the phone)* – I still need proof!

Natacha – Fine. I'll take a selfie with him at breakfast, send it to you, then I'm out of here. End of story.

Sam *(on the phone)* – All right, all right. But if you do fancy my mate, don't let me stop you.

Natacha – Yeah, right. Merry Christmas to you too! *(She puts away her phone and sits for a moment, lost in thought.)* He is rather good-looking, though... *(Pulling herself together.)* No. Absolutely not!

Blackout.

Scene 4

Fred puts a breakfast tray on the coffee table. Natacha comes in from the bathroom wearing the dressing gown Fred had on in the first scene. He looks rather surprised.

Natacha – I've borrowed your dressing gown.

Fred – Yes, I can see that...

Natacha – I can take it off if you like.

Fred – Take it off? Er...

Natacha – I mean, I can go and get dressed. So I can give it back.

Fred – No, no, please... Keep it on!

Natacha – Thank you for the towel... and the toothbrush.

Fred – Wasn't the water too hot?

Natacha – No. Why?

Fred – I don't know... I imagine you don't have hot running water every day in Belarus.

Natacha – No, you're right. Mostly it's lukewarm... when we're lucky enough to have running water at all!

Fred – Breakfast is served!

Natacha – Oh, thank you! It looks wonderful.

They begin to eat breakfast.

Fred – I imagine you'd rather have spent Christmas with your family...

Natacha – Unfortunately, I didn't have much choice. *(She looks at the parcels beneath the tree.)* I see Father Christmas has brought you some presents.

Fred – I was expecting a rather big one yesterday, with a fridge inside. But never mind...

Natacha – I'm sorry. I'm so sorry...

Fred – Perhaps I haven't done so badly out of the exchange after all.

She seems slightly flustered.

Natacha – Aren't you going to open them?

Fred – One of them's for you.

Natacha – For me?

Fred – The red one.

Natacha – What is it?

Fred – Open it.

Natacha unwraps the present and takes out a book.

Natacha – A driving test handbook?

Fred – Sorry, I didn't get a chance to go out shopping. It was the only thing I had to hand.

Natacha – Thank you. That's very kind...

Fred – If you ever want to get your driving licence here... It's a rather old edition, but the rules of the road can't have changed that much.

Natacha – I'll treasure it.

Fred – Are the road signs the same in Belarus? Or...?

Natacha – I... I don't know. I haven't got a driving licence.

Fred – But you do have road signs?

Natacha – Yes, I expect so. Anyway, I've taken up enough of your time. I'll finish getting dressed, and then... I'll leave.

Fred – At least finish your coffee!

She finishes her coffee.

Natacha – Could I ask one last favour?

Fred – Of course.

Natacha – I'd like a photograph. As a souvenir...

Fred – A photograph?

Natacha – On my phone! A selfie! Of the two of us...

Fred – All right.

She takes out her phone and holds it at arm's length. They look into the camera.

Natacha – Now look at me. *(She kisses him on the mouth and takes another picture.)*
From Belarus with love... *(He is flustered but quickly recovers.)* I'd better get dressed.

She starts towards the bedroom.

Fred – You know that travel programme where a man goes round the world staying with complete strangers?

Natacha – No...

Fred – He goes from country to country on his own, and challenges himself to find someone who'll put him up for the night.

Natacha – A challenge?

Fred – And he films himself, to prove he's managed it. When you took that selfie, it reminded me of him...

Natacha – Oh...

Fred – You're not doing something like that, are you?

Natacha – Doing what?

Fred – Making a Belarusian version of that programme? You said you were a model. Perhaps you work in television too...

Natacha – No, it's not for television. *(She turns serious.)* There is something I didn't tell you last night, because I didn't want to frighten you. My friend warned me that...

Fred – What?

Natacha – The Belarusian secret police have found out how I escaped, hidden in the fridge packaging. They've traced the order, and they know I was delivered here, to your flat.

Fred – No!

Natacha – I must leave straight away. They're very dangerous people. They might hurt you too.

Fred – Hurt me? But this is France! We've got the French police to protect us.

Natacha – Belarusian secret agents don't bother about the law, even abroad. Their speciality is poisoning people with radioactive substances...

Fred – I hope those tacos last night weren't radioactive. The delivery driver did look a bit odd...

Natacha – I'll get dressed and go.

She exits. Her jacket is still hanging over the back of a chair. Fred searches the pockets, finds some papers and examines them.

Fred – Charlotte... Actress... I knew it! The little cow. One of Sam's actress friends, no doubt. The sneaky bastard...

He puts the papers back into her pocket and finishes his coffee thoughtfully. Natacha returns, looking suitably tragic.

Natacha – Thank you, Fred. I'll never forget what you've done for me... Goodbye. Forever...

She starts to leave. He gets up decisively and bars her way.

Fred – No. I'm not letting you go.

Natacha – What?

Fred – You don't know a soul in this country! Where on earth are you going to sleep?

Natacha – Don't worry about me. I'll do what that man does in the programme you told me about...

Fred – That's exactly why I'm worried! You're a woman – a very beautiful woman. You can't go off with the first stranger who offers you a bed. It's dangerous!

Natacha – I can look after myself.

Fred – And what will you live on?

Natacha – I'm a model. If I have to, I know how to earn money.

Fred – From fashion shoots? It's not that easy to find work here, not without contacts.

Natacha – I wasn't thinking of that kind of photography...

Fred – Absolutely not. You're staying here, with me.

His mobile rings. He answers it.

Fred – Yes, Sam?

Sam *(on the phone)* – Hi, mate. I'm just round the corner. Can I come up for a coffee?

Fred – Sorry, but... now's not a good time.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Again? I'm going to get suspicious. You swear you haven't got a woman there?

Fred – I've got to go. I'll explain later. I'll ring you back.

He pockets his phone. Natacha is growing increasingly uncomfortable.

Natacha – I don't want you falling out with your friend because of me.

Fred – There's something I ought to tell you.

Natacha – Oh, yes?

Fred – I made a bet with him that no woman would stay the night at my place before the end of the year. That's why I didn't want you to sleep here.

Natacha – A bet?

Fred – Three thousand euros.

Natacha – That's a lot of money.

Fred – I don't care. I'm not turning you out into the street, especially on Christmas Day. You can stay here as long as you need.

Natacha – But you said yourself: if you hide someone without papers, you could get into trouble with the police.

Fred – During the war, people hid Resistance fighters in their cellars. Surely I can hide a Belarusian resistance fighter in my bed... especially one who happens to be a top model!

Natacha is momentarily lost for words.

Natacha – I don't know what to say... You're a hero.

Fred – Anyone would do the same. If they deported you and handed you back to the Belarusian secret police, I'd never forgive myself.

Natacha – Of course, but...

Fred – Not another word! You're staying until next year. We'll spend New Year's Eve together too.

Natacha – New Year's Eve? But you must have plans! I don't want to ruin your evening.

Fred – No plans at all. I meant to spend it alone to avoid temptation... Because of that bet I told you about.

Natacha – And you're going to lose 3,000 euros? Because of me?

Fred – My mind's made up. You're staying, and nobody is going to hurt you. I won't let you out of my sight for a moment.

Natacha – But surely you'll have to go to work at some point?

Fred – I'm a graphic designer. I work from home!

Natacha – Even so, I'll have to leave one day.

Fred – Of course. What you need are papers. Let me think... How could you become a French citizen? Or at least get a residence permit?

Natacha – I don't know...

Fred – You could do something heroic. Save a drowning child, say. That sort of thing.

Natacha – We're not going to throw a child into the Seine just so I can rescue it.

Fred – No, you're right...

Natacha – Especially as I'm a terrible swimmer. As I told you, Belarus has no sea.

Fred – I've got it!

Natacha – What?

Fred – I could adopt you!

Natacha – Adopt me? Like a dog?

Fred – Like my daughter!

Natacha – We're practically the same age! And I've already got parents.

Fred – I don't know... There must be a solution. I'll think of something.

Natacha – All right...

Fred – Oh, did I tell you? I learnt a bit of Russian at school!

Natacha – Did you?

Fred – Oh yes. I can't really speak it, of course, just a few words. I went to Moscow a few years ago, and bought a teach-yourself Russian book...

Natacha – Really?

Fred rummages through a box.

Fred – Where did I put it? With all this moving about...

Natacha – Don't go to any trouble...

Fred – Here it is! What luck!

Natacha – Oh, wonderful...

He opens a Russian phrasebook, or any other guide containing a few useful expressions for travellers to Russia.

Fred – Let's see... (*Reading the phonetic transcription.*) Panidielnik, ftornik, sreda, tchitvierk, piatnistsa, soubota, vaskrisenia...

She is clearly embarrassed: she hasn't understood a word.

Natacha – I'm sorry, I...

Fred – Must be my accent. Hang on, I'll try again. More carefully this time.

Natacha – No, no, but I'm not Russian. Belarusian is a completely different language. We can't understand the Russians at all. That's why we keep having conflicts with them...

Fred – I see...

Natacha – And what did you just say?

Fred – It means... (*He consults the phrasebook.*) Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday. The seven days we'll be spending together before the New Year!

Natacha – Right...

He gives her a foolish grin.

Blackout.

Scene 5

The same living room. The fridge box and the Christmas tree are gone. Natacha is alone, leafing through the Russian phrasebook. The doorbell rings. She opens the door and returns with Sam.

Sam – He's not here?

Natacha – He's gone shopping. He'll be back soon.

Sam – I'd better not stay, then. If he catches us together, the game's up. And I'd rather keep him guessing until the first of January.

Natacha – This joke has gone on long enough, Sam. I've been stuck here for a week, with your best mate, putting on a Russian accent.

Sam – Come on, admit it. It's been a laugh!

Natacha – For you, perhaps! I've managed to slip out for a few rehearsals, but tonight's New Year's Eve. I've got a play to perform! And so have you, for that matter.

Sam – Don't worry, you'll be there. Anyway, he's already lost the bet. So why are you still here?

Natacha – I don't know... I don't know how to get out of it, Sam. I don't want to disappoint him. Do you understand?

Sam – Not really. Unless...

Natacha – Unless what?

Sam – Unless you've actually fallen for him.

Natacha – Don't be ridiculous. Look, you'd better go. He could be back any minute.

Sam – All right, I'm off.

Sam exits. Natacha returns to her book. Fred enters carrying shopping bags.

Fred – I passed Sam on the stairs. Good thing you didn't let him in.

Natacha – I did what you told me. I don't open the door to anyone. But didn't he think it odd that you wouldn't ask him in?

Fred – He seemed in a hurry. It's the opening night of his play...

Natacha – Yes, I know.

Fred – How do you know?

Natacha – Oh, I don't... I mean, you must have mentioned it.

Fred – I've got a few things so we can celebrate New Year's Eve properly. Just the two of us. Do you like oysters?

Natacha – Oysters?

Fred – You don't know what they are either? Of course, there's no sea in Belarus...

Natacha – No...

Fred – We haven't got a fridge, but I'll put them on the windowsill for now. It's freezing out there. You'll see. Oysters are an acquired taste, but they're lovely.

Natacha – That's so kind of you. But about tonight...

Fred – Ah. You've lost your Belarusian accent again.

Natacha – Yes. You'd almost think I was French...

Fred – Funny you should say that, because I have a proposal for you.

Natacha – A proposal?

Fred – Sit down.

She sits, looking a little apprehensive.

Natacha – I'm listening...

Fred – I've been thinking about your future.

Natacha – Have you?

Fred – You speak the language perfectly. You're already a model. Have you ever thought about acting?

Natacha – Acting?

Fred – A friend of mine is an actor and a theatre director. Shall I introduce you?

Natacha – I don't know if... Besides, I've got no papers. I couldn't work here without them.

Fred – Exactly. That's why I've been thinking about how to get you a residence permit.

Natacha – You mean... adoption?

Fred – Adoption would take too long. And it's much too complicated. But there's a simpler way.

Natacha – Which is?

Fred – Marriage!

Natacha – Marriage? To whom?

Fred – To me!

Natacha – To you?

Fred – You're not married already, are you?

Natacha – No...

Fred – Then you could be my wife!

Natacha – You'd marry me just to help me get my papers?

Fred – Why not? A marriage of convenience.

Natacha – A marriage of convenience?

Fred – A late Christmas present for you.

Natacha – That's incredibly kind, but I can't accept.

Fred – Why ever not?

Natacha – Well, because...

Fred – Don't worry. Nothing would happen between us.

Natacha – Nothing at all?

Fred – A marriage in name only. You know what that means, don't you?

Natacha – Yes...

She is deeply moved and confused.

Fred – Unless you'd rather...

They both hesitate.

Natacha – Yes... Actually... I think I'd rather...

They fall into each other's arms and kiss passionately.

Blackout.

Scene 6

Fred and Natacha come back from the bedroom. They are both extremely embarrassed.

Natacha – I'm sorry. I don't know what came over me.

Fred – No, it was my fault.

Natacha – And about what you said earlier...

Fred – I think we're past the stage of being so polite with each other now...

Natacha – Yes... Well... You were offering me a marriage of convenience?

Fred – It's the first time I've slept with a woman immediately after proposing a marriage of convenience.

Natacha – Do you do this often? I mean... is it a chat-up technique?

Fred – It ought to be. It seems to work.

They exchange embarrassed smiles.

Natacha – There's something I have to tell you.

Fred – I think you've lost your accent for good. Shame. I rather liked it.

Natacha – That's precisely what I need to talk to you about.

Fred – Go on.

Natacha – It isn't easy to say.

Fred – What?

Natacha – I can't spend New Year's Eve here with you tonight.

Fred – Why not?

Natacha – Because... I'm in a play.

Fred – A play? What play?

Natacha – Sam's play.

He pauses, pretending to realise the truth – which, in fact, he already knows.

Fred – I see... So you're...?

Natacha – An actress. Sam asked me to play this little trick on you. But I didn't know... I hadn't met you then. You understand?

He pretends to be outraged.

Fred – So you two have been making a fool of me! It was a plot to get money out of me, and you helped him!

Natacha – I'm so sorry. I never thought...

Fred – And I suppose he paid you for it?

Natacha – He offered to split the winnings, yes. But that's out of the question now. I'll tell him...

Fred – I don't believe it. You accepted money to sleep with me?

Natacha – No! That wasn't part of the deal! I was only meant to spend one night at your flat so he'd win the bet. Nothing else!

Fred – I'm terribly disappointed, Natacha. Assuming your name really is Natacha. I believed the whole thing... I believed in us.

Natacha – So did I. I promise you.

Fred – I'm sorry, but I'll never be able to trust you again.

Natacha – I understand. I'll finish getting ready and go. You'll never see me again. Don't worry.

She exits. Fred takes out his mobile and calls a number.

Fred – Sam?

Sam (*on the phone*) – Ringing to gloat, are you?

Fred – What do you think?

Sam (*on the phone*) – All right, you win. I owe you 3,000 euros.

Fred – What if we forgot about that stupid bet?

Sam (*on the phone*) – Oh, really? How generous of you. Well, I've got a little present for you too: a photo of you with the Russian doll who's been sleeping in your bed for the past week. Though when I say sleeping...

Fred looks at the selfie Sam has just sent him.

Fred – That bitch...

Sam (*on the phone*) – So, do you admit it?

Fred – Yes.

Sam (*on the phone*) – Then you're the one who owes me 3,000 euros, mate!

Fred – And she sent you that photograph, did she?

Sam (*on the phone*) – Does it matter? All's fair when there's a bet to win, isn't it?

Fred – Don't bother. She's told me everything.

Sam (*on the phone*) – Has she? Pillow talk, was it?

Fred – You little bastard.

Sam laughs.

Sam (*on the phone*) – All right, I admit it. She's a friend of mine. The actress in my play.

Fred – I know.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Come on, Fred, don't take it like that. It was just a joke. You don't owe me anything, of course. But you have to admit it was funny.

Fred – No. The bet stands. I was caught out, and that's my problem. I gave you my word.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Are you sure?

Fred – Come to think of it, I should thank you. You've given me a chance to sleep with a stunning woman.

Sam *(on the phone)* – You mean you actually slept together? You're luckier than I am! I've been trying to get somewhere with her for six months.

Fred – It's cost me 3,000 euros.

Sam *(on the phone)* – I hope you're going to see her again, at that price.

Fred – I don't know...

Natacha appears in the bedroom doorway. She can hear the conversation, but Fred hasn't seen her.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Look, I know you, Fred. Are you an even bigger idiot than I thought, or did you work it all out from the start and make the most of it?

Fred – All right, I admit it. I've been playing a little game with her too. That's why I feel so bad now.

Sam *(on the phone)* – Honestly, it was only meant to be a joke. I never imagined it would go this far.

Fred – I'd better go. She's leaving. I want to see if I can put things right.

Sam *(on the phone)* – I hope it was worth it. At that price...

Fred puts his mobile away. Natacha comes in and makes as if to leave.

Natacha – Well... I'm going.

Fred – Sam's just sent me this.

Natacha – What?

Fred shows her his mobile phone.

Fred – That selfie we took on Christmas morning.

Natacha – Yes. I sent it to him. But that was a week ago... So much has happened since.

Fred – Yes...

Natacha – I'm sorry things have ended like this. Please forgive me.

She makes as if to leave.

Fred – Wait...

Natacha – I've betrayed your trust, Fred. You're a good man. I don't deserve you.

Fred – I don't want us to part like this.

Natacha – No, you're right. We can't start a relationship with a lie like that. Sam told me a lot about you. I know you've already been badly hurt by women. I'd better go.

She heads for the door.

Fred – Charlotte!

Natacha – How do you know my name's Charlotte?

Fred – I don't know. Sam must have told me.

Natacha – Or was it because you went through my jacket pockets?

Fred – Of course not!

Natacha – Stop pretending. I heard the end of your phone call. You two have been making a fool of me!

Fred – You've got it all wrong, I swear.

Natacha – You knew from the beginning. Did Sam tell you? Did you plan it together so I'd end up in your bed?

Fred – Sam didn't tell me anything. I worked it out for myself. Let's face it, your story was pretty far-fetched.

Natacha – Perhaps I'm not such a good actress after all.

Fred – At first, I really did believe you.

Natacha – I didn't do it for the money. I saw it as a challenge.

Fred – Well, we had a good laugh, didn't we?

Natacha – Yes, but in the end you're the one who manipulated me.

Fred – Hang on. Let's not swap roles here!

Natacha – You knew, and you used it to seduce me. You took advantage of me.

Fred – Took advantage of you? Don't you think that's going a bit far?

They stare at each other defiantly, but their attraction is stronger than their anger.

Natacha – Don't you want to take advantage of me a little more?

Fred – Yes...

They kiss passionately once more.

Blackout.

Scene 7

Fred is working on his laptop. Natacha comes in. They kiss.

Natacha – Happy New Year, darling.

Fred – Happy New Year, Charlotte! Unless you'd rather I carried on calling you Natacha?

Natacha – Only on certain occasions...

Fred – And will you put on that Russian accent to whisper naughty things in my ear?

Natacha – Belarusian accent! It's much more erotic.

Fred – Anyway, congratulations on last night's performance. You really are a wonderful actress.

Natacha – Thank you.

Fred – Fragile – Handle with Care... It's funny. The plot of that little comedy was strangely familiar...

Natacha – Yes. I think our own story had already been partly written for us. By your mate Sam.

Fred – Now we just have to write the ending together.

Natacha – I'd love to write it with you.

Fred – Since I've lost the bet anyway, you could move in here, you know.

Natacha – I'd like that. But is there enough room for both of us?

Fred – If not, we'll move. I've got a mate who'll be delighted to help us. He owes me that much.

Natacha – So he still expects his 3,000 euros?

Fred – I'm the one insisting on paying him. A bet's a bet.

Natacha – Half of it was supposed to be mine. You can have my share. That means you only owe him 1,500.

Fred – Yes...

Natacha – What is it?

Fred – I have got an idea that might save us the money, but... I'm not sure you'd agree.

Natacha – Go on, then.

The doorbell rings. Fred goes to open the front door and returns with Sam.

Sam – Hi, Charlotte.

Natacha – Hi.

Sam – Just came to wish you both a happy New Year.

Fred – And, while you're here, collect your cheque.

Sam – I told you, I don't want your cheque.

Fred – And I told you: a bet's a bet.

Sam – Call it payment for all the posters you've designed for me for nothing.

Fred – Absolutely not. It's a debt of honour. Like a poker debt.

He takes out his chequebook, writes a cheque, tears it out and offers it to Sam.

Sam – If you insist...

But just as Sam reaches for the cheque, Fred has second thoughts.

Fred – Hang on. There's something I've just remembered...

Sam – What's that?

Fred – Remember the escape clause?

Sam – What escape clause?

Fred – I lost the bet if a woman spent the night at my flat before the end of the year... unless she turned out to be the one and I married her.

Sam – So?

Fred turns to Natacha.

Fred – It's too late for a marriage in name only, but... how would you feel about a white wedding?

She kisses him to show her agreement.

Natacha – If it saves you 3,000 euros...

Sam smiles.

Fred – Sorry, mate. Looks as though you won't be getting that cheque after all.

Sam – All right. But I insist on being your best man.

Fred – Wasn't that what you had in mind all along, when you delivered that Russian doll to my door in a cardboard box?

Sam – Who knows?

Fred – Oh, and I've got some more bad news for you.

Sam – What now?

Fred – The flat's going to be too small for both of us. So I'll have to move again.

Sam – Let's hope it'll be the last time... at least until the family grows.

Natacha – Let's not get too far ahead of ourselves...

Sam laughs.

Sam – I brought some champagne to celebrate the New Year... and your engagement.

Fred – Wonderful. Except that I still haven't got a fridge to chill it in!

Sam – Don't worry. Your fridge is downstairs in my van. It's been there for a whole week! All you have to do is plug it in.

Fred – Thanks, Sam... (*He turns to Natacha.*) So, is that a yes?

Natacha – Tak.

Sam – Tak?

Fred – I believe that's Belarusian for yes.

Fred and Natacha kiss.

Sam – It's extraordinary, the way you two met, isn't it?

Fred – If you hadn't come up with that ridiculous stunt...

Natacha – Well... it wasn't entirely his doing.

Fred – What now?

Sam – There's one last thing I ought to tell you.

Fred – Should I be worried?

Natacha – Sam showed me photographs of you, and... he painted a very convincing picture. A bloke so disappointed in women he was about to enter a convent.

Sam – Convents are for women! Though it would be just like this little pervert to join a convent full of nuns...

Fred – I see. So you decided to take up the challenge.

Sam – Women do love a hopeless case.

Natacha – I would never have agreed to do this to just anyone. And I was quite sure you wouldn't believe the story for more than fifteen minutes.

Fred – All right, I admit it. I didn't believe it for more than five minutes.

Natacha – So we were both pretending to believe it.

Fred – When two people want to believe the same lie, isn't that almost the truth?

Natacha – Yes. That's quite a good definition of love.

They kiss.

Blackout.

The End

About the author

Born in 1955 in Auvers-sur-Oise (France), Jean-Pierre Martinez first took to the stage as a drummer in several rock bands before becoming a semiologist in advertising. He then worked as a television screenwriter before returning to the stage as a playwright. He has written around a hundred scripts for television and 123 plays, some of which have become classics (*Friday the 13th*, *Strip Poker*). His plays have been performed in more than 100 countries and translated into around 50 languages.

Amateur and professional theatre groups looking for plays to perform can download Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays for free from his websites :

<https://jeanpierremartinez.net/>

<https://comediatheque.net/>

However, performance rights, which constitute fair compensation for the author's work, are a legal obligation. Whether you are an amateur or a professional, you must request authorization to perform the play and pay the corresponding royalties for the production.

Jean-Pierre Martinez is represented by the Society of Dramatic Authors and Composers (SACD).

To get in touch with Jean-Pierre Martinez and request authorization to perform one of his works, please use the [contact form on his websites](#).

Jean-Pierre Martinez recently returned to music, writing original songs inspired by his poems and plays.

With **Jean-Pierre Martinez Music**, he extends that creative universe through original songs: short stories in musical form, humorous or melancholy, in which each song sometimes becomes a miniature theatrical scene.

<https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/>

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues

Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

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
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
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
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman,
one giant leap backward for
Mankind
The Ways 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
Hangover
Happy Hour
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
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6

All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police
Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's
Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
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
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in
France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
Blackouts
Don't panic!
Dramedies
Enough is Enough
Ethan and Eve
Every Colour under the Sun
For real and for fun
Funny Stories
Him and Her
Killer Sketches
Lockdown Shorts
Lost time Chronicles
Memoirs of a Suitcase
No Sense Off Limits
Now and then
Of Animals and Men
Open Hearts
Open Letters
Park Bench Shorts
Sidewalk Chronicles
Stage Briefs
Stories to die for

*All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded
free of charge from his websites:*

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