La Comédiathèque



Like A Fish in The Air

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Tragi-cosmic Monologues

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Like a fish in the air

Poetic, psychoanalytic, and humorous monologues

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Without being philosophers, or lying on a psychoanalyst's couch, we all sometimes wonder about the meaning of life — or at least the meaning of our own. We ask small questions without big answers, and sometimes big questions without the beginnings of an answer. Then the routine of daily life suddenly comes off the rails and leaves us dizzy at the edge of an unfathomable void. Something troubled rises from the depths, and between the waves, like a sea monster, we glimpse a forbidden meaning — the tragi-cosmic essence of our ordinary lives. A comic descent into the depths of our superficial existence...

Cast

Twenty-three monologues. One performer per monologue;
the cycle may be performed by one or more actors.

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1 – Untitled

Is there anyone here? No... So you're like me. You also haven't quite managed to become someone. Being the son of nobody is one thing. Some have even become very famous. But who remembers the parents of the son of nobody? Nobody does. Since I entered this world, I've always been told: if you want to become someone in life, don't do just anything. And trust me, those who told me this were not just anybody. So I tried to make something of myself. To become someone, like them. But I never made anything of myself, I know that well. I never knew what to do with myself. I'm just a number, as they say. Quite a character, some would add. I must not have done what was needed. So, I do what I can. I put on a show. I'm a comedian, as they say. "That one's a real comedian!" Can a comedian ever become somebody? For that, people would have to take him seriously... But even I can't take myself seriously. My doctor, when I visit him for a sick leave, always tells me: "Stop putting on an act!" Not to mention my banker, who thinks I'm a clown. "Would you lend money to a clown?" he asks me that all the time. Especially at zero interest... When you lend yourself to ridicule, you can never be sure of getting anything back... That's why comedians rarely end up owning even their final resting place. I don't have a home either. It even seems like I don't know where I live. If only I had met someone in life. "You should try to meet someone," as they say. But if you think it's easy to form a serious relationship with someone who doesn't even know where they live. I didn't ask for much. Not necessarily someone... If only I had drawn the right number. But no. I drew some funny characters, believe me. Many wrong numbers. A few temporary encounters. Plenty of wrong numbers. But never the bonus number, let alone the winning number... And now, it's too late, isn't it? I don't have much time left, I know that. And I know that after I'm gone, no one will say: "That guy, he was somebody." Can we even talk about someone's passing when it comes to a person who never managed to become somebody? No, at my funeral, they'll say: "That guy, he was quite an actor." If there's anyone at my funeral, of course. Have you noticed, at the funerals of famous people, there's always a crowd of anonymous mourners, as they say in the newspapers? A crowd of ordinary folks... But at the graves of unknown people, there's never anyone. Especially not celebrities. Or else, you have to be the Unknown Soldier, die on the field of honour, and be very lucky posthumously. No, in times of peace, you shouldn't dream. No one will ever rekindle the flame of all the deceased who never managed to become someone in their lifetime...

2 – Hitchhiking

Where are you headed? You don't know...? Well then, hop in, I'll take you. Is that all you've got for luggage? You're right. When you don't know where you're going, there's no need to burden yourself. Me, I just have a small bag. A toothbrush. Spare socks. A swimsuit, just in case... Don't forget to fasten your seatbelt, there are checks sometimes. I don't really know where I'm going either, to be honest. I've taken a few days off. I'm going to try to find a quiet place to clear my head. I have a vague idea for a novel... With laptops these days, it's convenient. You can write anywhere. Even at home. I even have the internet on it! When I leave home, I take the mailbox with me. This place isn't bad, is it? What a shame they're forecasting lousy weather. I love driving like this. Already on my way, not yet there. I feel like I exist a bit. Maybe that's why I never finish anything. The number of novels I've started! When I was a kid, my favourite part was the journey between home and school. I would savour it by walking as slowly as I possibly could. However... no matter how much time you take, you always end up somewhere. I absolutely need to refuel now. Let me know if you spot a petrol station, will you? Yeah... When I was a kid, I was terrified by the certainty that I would die someday. It's everyone's destiny, right? So, I first tried to convince myself that I wasn't like everyone else. Yet, I soon had to accept the reality that I wasn't Jesus Christ. Only the elastic stretch of time separated me from certain death. Maybe even premature death! Not only was I sure I would die, but I didn't know when. Anyway, it became urgent to slow down to avoid dying prematurely. Why is that guy honking so much? Overtake if you're in such a hurry! What was I saying? Right, so, unable to stop time, I then tried to savour every moment. To make it flow less quickly, you see. With the secret hope that a denser memory would eventually halt the hourglass.

To begin with, I randomly selected a moment and arbitrarily decided to cherish it for the rest of my life. And it worked! The first time... An unforgettable moment! Although absolutely meaningless... I've never been able to replicate that feat. Anyway, over time, my perspective on existence has changed, right? We die, of course, but we never completely disappear. Nothing is lost, nothing is created. Unfortunately, as time passes, the certainty of eternal return terrifies me even more than the idea of a definitive end. Will it never stop? And what will become of us when we're dead? True, reincarnation is frightening, if you think about it. Even if you're not completely satisfied with your current life, there's no guarantee that when you're resurrected, you won't end up in the shoes of someone even unhappier than yourself... There's so much misery in the world. Doesn't the thought of this Russian roulette scare you? No, we don't know where we're going. We don't even know where we're coming from! Does a butterfly remember being a caterpillar? Man doesn't even remember being a monkey. Ah, a petrol station! I thought we were going to run out of fuel. If you want to stretch your legs. Or use the toilet. Take your time; we're not in a hurry. We don't know where we're going...

3 – On the Couch

Should I lie down or...? Okay... I'm not quite sure where to begin... I found your contact details in the phone book... You know how it is – you can ask a friend if they know a good, not-too-expensive dentist who won't cause too much pain, but... someone like you. So, I consulted the phone book... And then I randomly picked your name from the rather long list... Quite a job paid in cash in these times, isn't it? They say you don't need a degree to do your job. That all it takes is to have been a client to start your own practice... Is that true? So, after this, I can count this session as professional training. But doesn't it bother you a bit that all your clients become potential competitors? Can you imagine? I visit my butcher, buy a calf's head, and as I walk out, I open a butcher shop right across the street... Not very likely, mind you; I can't stand meat... I even have trouble with eggs. Well, I eat them occasionally, but... They say birds are descendants of dinosaurs... So, an egg is a bit like a dinosaur foetus, right? In reality, I didn't pick your name entirely by chance. You were the last one on the list... Since your surname starts with a Z... I probably wanted to right a wrong... It's my Zorro side. Yes, I imagine others always choose the first one on the list... Mr. Aa, Mrs. Ab, or Mr. Bb... I can imagine what you must have endured during your studies... If you had any... Always the last one in line for everything... I'm okay with it. I'm in the M's... Well towards the back of the line, but never mind... Funny thing is, the Z comes at the end of my surname... My father was Spanish... I don't know why I said "was," because he still is... Alive, I mean. Well, I think he is... But can we still say he's Spanish? He became a naturalised citizen... French, I mean... Not stuffed... Or frozen... It's crazy, all those women who put their kids in the freezer, right? Between the fish fingers and the ice lollies... If only kids could do the same with their parents... Preserve them in the freezer until they figure out what to do with them... Why am I telling you all this...? Oh yes, the Z! So, I have to tell you everything from the beginning, right? From A to Z. Or rather, from M to Z... Since mine begins with M... I've never liked my first name either... Did you ever see the television series Bewitched? Samantha's husband, the perennial fool of the story, was called Darrin in English. But in the French version they called him Jean-Pierre. Just like me! Samantha spends her entire day rescuing him from the embarrassment of being taken for the genuine idiot he truly is. And she has to use all of her magical powers to prevent that. Well, she loves her husband because he's a nice guy. Nice, but an idiot. That's the general idea people have of Jean-Pierres, apparently. I have a daughter too. I should have called her Tabitha. I don't mean to say my wife is a witch. She's more like a fairy... To put up with me... That's what my mother always tells her: "How do you put up with him?" My mother is from Normandy. Like the cows. So, milk, butter, cream... We've had our fill... I can't digest butter, you see. I must have inherited that from my father. In Spain, it's more about olive oil. He always used to say to her: "Why do you put so much cream in the soup?" He should have asked her why she didn't put more soup in her cream... Apparently, she couldn't help herself... It's in the genes... Eventually, my father found someone else to serve him soup... At home, it's me who cooks now. That way, at least, I know what I'm eating. You're not saying anything, are you? But I bet you're thinking plenty. You must be wondering why I came to see you. If I knew, I probably wouldn't have come, I guess. Well, there is something, after all. How can I put this? The more time goes by... the closer I feel to minerals. I don't know why. You know the saying: "The more I know people, the

more I love my dog"? Well, for me, the more time passes, the more people bore me. Dogs too, actually. It's with stones that I truly feel at ease... A human life... It's too short, isn't it? So, a dog's life... Whereas a stone doesn't age... Even trees don't mean anything to me anymore. Though some are over a thousand years old. But a tree also eventually dies. It can even get diseases. And then it's eaten by worms, just like everything else. It eventually goes back into the food chain. A stone, no. Nobody eats rocks! Except maybe hens, it's true... To make the shells of their eggs. You're right; we can't really say that stones are truly eternal either... Do you think dinosaurs also ate rocks to make their eggs? In that case, what's the point of being a stone? If it's just to end up as empty shells after making an omelette... So why do I like stones, doctor? I mean, Mr. Z. Do you think it has something to do with my name? Jean-Pierre M... And pierre means “stone” in French...

4 – The Small Hours

The small hours. You know them? One, two, three, four... By five, we'd already be free from trouble. Just a bit of patience, with the radio softly playing in the background. But instead, we wake up and peer out the window. Not a glimmer of light. We strain our ears. Not a bird's song. The diurnal creatures are still asleep, the nocturnal ones are already in bed. Not the slightest sign that morning is on its way. We are in the deepest darkness, in the land of no man, the night of the wakeful sleepers. Of course, making the effort to rise and move about is an option. But it seems premature. Almost unnatural. To see the night before having seen the daylight... So we must turn back. Cross the border again. Return to where nothing can reach us yet. Where nothing can wait for us. Where no one can hear us. The beyond is on this side of an eternity that can run both ways. I count to a hundred. Backwards. Ninety-nine, ninety-eight... Hoping that before the end of this countdown, I will have stopped counting. On nights when my insomnia is at its worst, I start at seven billion. Six billion, nine hundred ninety-nine million, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand, nine hundred ninety-nine others before my turn comes in this vast open-air waiting room that is the world of the living. How long to peel away one by one all these existences that are not mine, to recognise myself in this crowd and find my sleep? One night to know who we are. What sets us apart from others. A lifetime to discover everything that is not us. To die. To blend into the indistinct once again. To sleep. To let go. With the fear of waking up as someone else. In a darkness that would be a hopeless nightmare without the prospect of morning. What keeps me alive, what keeps me awake, is the fear of sinking through a bad night into the wrong sleep, eternal fatigue. Insomnia is an unending race against time. A temporary victory. Four, three, two, one... Suspended between the drowsiness of the night and the harshness of awakening, the small hours tick away the measured time of the sleepless.

5 – Darkened Cinemas

You're probably wondering what I'm doing. Well, I'm much like you. I'm waiting. Waiting for something to happen. What? I couldn't tell you. If I did know... I'm waiting for things to get better. I could get up and take a walk while waiting, as you might suggest... You might do the same, actually... But no... I don't think that would be very prudent... Just in case something interesting happens while we're away... Alright, for the moment, nothing's happening. But it could start up again when we least expect it. Suddenly... You know, it's like when you're at the cinema, and the film suddenly stops because it has melted in the heat of the projector. The lights come on, and we all sit there like idiots, temporarily blinded, as if we were abruptly woken from a dream. We gradually regain our composure and settle into another round of waiting. Hoping that the film will start again as soon as possible. That we'll be plunged back into our artificial coma by starting the projector again. And then we realise that we have absolutely no idea how long the breakdown will last. Maybe it's more serious than that, and the screening will be cancelled. In fact, we're not even sure if there's anyone in the projection booth to fix things. What if the projectionist left right after starting the film? After a while, one among us, the bravest, gets up to see what's going on. Drawing the admiring gaze of those who opt to remain in their seats, waiting anxiously for someone to take the lead. But the hero doesn't know where to go to rescue his fellow stranded cinemagoers. A projection booth is very mysterious. There are no windows. Just a narrow slit for the projector's light to shine through. We don't even know where the hidden entrance to this forbidden citadel is. So the guy leaves the screening room, goes back to the cinema entrance, and asks the cashier on duty what's happening, who obviously has no idea. She doesn't know where the projectionist is either. Apparently, no one has ever seen him. But she says she'll find out. The guy returns to the screening room after this act of bravery, ready to share his report and anticipating applause for his daring initiative, despite the very uncertain outcome of his efforts. However, when he opens the door, he realises that the screening room has once again plunged into darkness. The film has already restarted! Without him! He has been taken in. He thinks he would have been better off patiently waiting with the others for things to sort themselves out. With all this, he missed a part of the film. Just a few seconds, no more. But it might have been a key scene. Imagine missing the sled scene in 'Citizen Kane'! And let's not forget that these missed frames are in addition to those probably sacrificed by the projectionist in his hurried attempt to repair the melted film by welding its two ends together. "Now, I'm going to be permanently lost," thinks the returning moviegoer, as his eyes haven't yet readjusted to the darkness. Fumbling his way back to his seat, he whispers to his neighbour, asking for a summary of what happened during his absence. The girl is about to reluctantly respond, fearing she might miss an essential line while catching him up, when a voice behind them angrily shouts, "Shh!" Relieved, she shoots an apologetic look at the troublemaker before turning her beautiful, fascinated eyes back to the screen, as she plunges her hand back into her popcorn with delight. The show must go on! But the poor zombie, he no longer understands the movie... So I prefer to wait. Do you know how much a savings account pays these days...? Three percent per year... You put your minimum wage into the savings account, get yourself frozen for five hundred years. They microwave you, and you're a multimillionaire. Now that's worth waiting for, isn't it?

6 – Richophobia

Excuse me, but before we begin, I'd like to ask you a little question. Don't worry, it's not a survey. I know some performers who take advantage of the system. You know the trick. They claim they're doing a one-person show, persuade their friends to buy tickets, then reveal that they're actually working for a polling company and proceed to make the audience fill in an endless questionnaire. To be fair, the system itself encourages confusion. These days, everyone doing an odd job seems to be on a performer's contract. Apparently it's cheaper for the employer. Perhaps that's what they mean by the society of the spectacle. Anyway, I assure you, my question is entirely free of charge, and I have absolutely no ulterior motive. Here it is. Are there any rich people in the audience? Nobody? Don't worry, I'm not being paid by the tax authorities to identify anyone who's forgotten to declare their wealth. Really? Not one rich person? Fine. In that case, I can explain my little problem without offending anyone.

Sometimes I wonder whether I'm quite normal. We're all supposed to envy the rich, aren't we? I expect you do too. Well, I don't know why, but to me wealth is rather like an embarrassing disease. A socially transmitted disease, if you prefer. Something nasty you catch through unprotected contact with unfortunate people who are already infected. I don't know. Wealth rather disgusts me. Yes. Rich people inspire a sort of pitying contempt in me. I think that's called condescension. That's it. I look down on rich people. I realise that's completely inappropriate. They're the ones who should be looking down on me, because I haven't managed to become one of them. Everyone wants to be rich, don't they? Apart from those who already are, of course. And even they probably want to be richer. Money is addictive, you know. And there's always somebody poorer than you. Just look at politicians. They can spend years praising equality, then arrange the tax rules so their own considerable fortunes somehow escape the definition of wealth. Clearly being rich isn't quite as respectable as we're led to believe.

But let's get back to the genuinely rich. Not those who've merely crossed the threshold of wealth, as others slip below the poverty line. No, the unmistakably rich. Millionaires, as we used to call them. Of course, a million used to be an extraordinary sum. Then came inflation, new currencies, property booms. Before long, anyone who owned a tiny room in a fashionable capital city could claim to be a millionaire, at least in yesterday’s money. Isn't that wonderful? We may not have solved unemployment, but a former domestic servant who owns a cramped attic room seven floors up, with no lift, can now be worth a fortune on paper. Provided she sells it to another millionaire and goes to sleep under a bridge, of course. That's why being a millionaire is no longer enough. These days you need to be a billionaire. In some currency, at least. It's inflation. Or the property bubble, as they call it. And bubbles have always been a privilege of the rich. While poor people swallow a cheap fizzy aspirin to get over a hangover, rich people drink magnums of champagne to help digest their caviar.

The property bubble is really a return to slavery. In the days of Gone with the Wind, at least the slaves had permanent jobs. They worked for nothing on vast estates. Today's slaves work themselves into the ground to pay off the mortgage on a tiny flat.

They spend their whole working lives handing over two monthly wages to the bank, even though they only earn one. Now, where was I going with all this? Oh yes, rich people. Seriously. Do you really envy these poor souls? Imagine having lunch in an exclusive restaurant, then trying to drive home in a Ferrari through streets so congested that you can barely get through on a bicycle. No, thank you.

And there's another serious disadvantage to being rich: you can only mix with other rich people. It's obvious. When you're a billionaire, you can't go on holiday with a friend who's on the minimum wage. It completely distorts the relationship. Of course, if you're poor, it's much the same. You're condemned to stay among your own kind. But I maintain that poor people are much more entertaining. Some are even rather nice. I know a few. Not at all pretentious. All right, not all rich people are alike. Some are worse than others. Especially the newly rich, who haven't learnt the rules yet. Wealth is a way of life. It takes practice. A newly rich person doesn't know how to behave. Inevitably they make mistakes, and the old rich make sure they know it.

Can you imagine yourself dining in a truly grand restaurant? You arrive in your Ferrari. An attendant holds out a hand for your keys so they can park the car while you tuck into an extravagant dinner with a supermodel. Now imagine handing the keys to your battered little hatchback to a stranger before going into the local café for a sausage and chips you can only afford on credit. You'd be terrified they'd never bring back your miserable old car, on which you still owe several instalments. So with a Ferrari, imagine! No, you can't improvise wealth. You have to learn it. Poverty, on the other hand, comes naturally. Nobody has ever criticised a newly poor person for using the wrong spoon on their first visit to a soup kitchen. There's only one spoon, for the soup and the pudding alike.

Actually, there aren't very many newly poor people. If you're born poor, you generally stay poor. And it's much the same with the rich. Some rich people do go bankrupt, admittedly. But a bankrupt millionaire still tends to have considerably more money than you. Which brings me to a second question. Are there any poor people in the audience? I know: if you’re here, you must have been able to afford a theatre ticket without dipping into your budget for pasta. But there might be a few complimentary guests. The thing is, between you and me, some poor people are idiots too. Why do you think people spend so much time calling each other 'poor idiots'?

The worst, to my mind, is the militant poor person. The proud, card-carrying proletarian who wants everyone else to be poor too, out of solidarity. There's no reason to be ashamed of poverty, I agree, but it's hardly something to boast about. We can't blame people for being poor. Most did nothing to deserve it. But let's be fair: we shouldn't blame rich people for being rich either. Most of them did nothing to deserve that. Ideally, of course, there would be neither rich nor poor. Just people like us. Comfortable, but nothing extravagant. Just comfortably below the wealth-tax threshold. But that isn't going to happen, is it? It's been tried. In Russia, in China. It usually ends with a few million dead, and the poor even poorer and the rich even richer.

Besides, it wouldn't be fair. Poor people don't need rich people to remind them they're poor. That's a fact of life. But the rich need to know there are poor people around, otherwise they can't fully appreciate being rich. No, you're right. I ought to be more tolerant of the wealthy. And you never know. Someone who's afraid of foreigners can be reasonably confident they won't wake up one morning to discover they've become foreign themselves, provided they don't travel too far. But someone who's afraid of the rich? Anything can happen. Nobody is entirely safe from becoming wealthy. Not even performers. Not even those who work for whatever the audience puts in the hat. (Holds out a hat.) Well? Let's see the colour of your money.

7 – Once Upon a Final Time

You have to expect anything in life. Be prepared. In the morning, you wake up. Like every day. You never know if it might not be the last morning of your life. Well, there are times when you can suspect it a bit, right...? Like when you can't even get out of bed anymore. When you're suffering from a long illness, a long illness that's more towards its end, you see, and the hospital chaplain happened to pass by to ask if you really needed anything. Then, you think that if it's not for today, at least it won't be long. When you're about to jump out of a plane in mid-flight, looking up at the sky so you don't see what's below, and you imagine what would happen if the parachute didn't open. So, you check one last time that the ring isn't stuck. That the fabric isn't torn. That by mistake, you're not about to leap into the void with your sleeping bag. Even if you're not religious, you make the sign of the cross just in case. It can't do any harm. And then, with all shame aside, you can always decide not to jump. Stay in the plane, ring the flight attendant, and order a whisky. While waiting for the plane to land smoothly. Or crash. But all together. When you're a matador, and you're about to kill six bulls in a row, between five and seven in the evening. And if one of them doesn't see eye to eye on this? Without further ado, the ox that he almost became might revolt. How long will you survive in this open-air slaughter? Since the dawn of time, killing to live is a risky job. In the corridor of death row, when you hear footsteps behind the door in the wee hours, and room service brings you a continental breakfast on a tray, served on fine china, instead of the usual dishwater in a tin cup. Then, you know you have to check out of the room before noon, that the bill will arrive soon, and you won't escape it. When you bungee jump, and you know the cord could snap. When you snap and jump without a cord. When you hook up with a condom and it snaps. When you snap and hook up without a condom. When you wake up in the morning, and you no longer know why. When you think that living would be surviving it. When you'd rather die for something than live for nothing. When you're starving, you already weigh nothing, and there's no other way. When you've been told too many times to go hang yourself. Yes. There are times when you can suspect there won't be a next time. And then there are times when you don't see it coming. Times when you leave as you came. By accident. Where you die as you lived. Foolishly. Times when you pass away by chance. Without notice. When you die by mistake. Without an announcement. One day you wake up in the morning, and there won't be any more. And you don't know it. There are times when you die without warning.

8 – The Definition of Love (by Default)

How long have we known each other? Twenty years at least, right? (Pause) Why did we never sleep together, by the way? I mean, we get on really well... We could've even got married!

It's funny, I almost think of you as an ex. Even though we've never been together. We almost were, once. Remember? You got me drunk. Or maybe it was the other way around. We ended up at your place, completely smashed. We laughed like idiots all night… and somehow forgot to sleep together. Maybe it's because we get along too well. There wouldn't have been enough spark. We'd have ended up bored, eventually. Sure, we laugh a lot, but... I just can't picture myself having sex with someone who's laughing. I mean, there's laughing and laughing. I can make a girl laugh to get her into bed. But sleep with a girl who makes me laugh...? No, if I slept with you, I'd feel as if I were sleeping with a friend. A female friend, if you like.

And I don't like blondes. I know, you're not blonde anymore. But you were when I met you... How was I supposed to know it wasn't your natural colour? Funny how these things work, isn't it? It's not that I don't like blondes, but... It depends. You were just a bit too blonde for me. Girls who are too blonde, I don't know, they sort of gross me out a little. Physically. I don't know why… Maybe it's a skin thing. Now it's too late. I'll always picture you as a blonde who dyed her hair brown. Although you're not really a brunette either... Not quite chestnut. I don't even know what to call it... It's not blonde, it's not brown.

It's not that I don't find you attractive. Actually, every guy fancies you. Normally that would be a turn-on. But with you… no. I honestly don't know why I've never wanted to sleep with you... Maybe that's what love is... I mean, that je-ne-sais-quoi that makes two people want to have sex. Or more, if there's chemistry. Looks like we've just defined it – by default.

Now, why did I marry my wife instead of you, or someone else...? Well, first of all, she fancied me. That made things simpler. If she hadn't, would I have kept trying...? And if I had kept trying, would she have liked that...? We'll never know. Mutual love is simpler, but it's less... How can I put it...? No risk, no glory. Actually, I do wonder what she saw in me. Do you have any idea...? I suppose I could just ask her, but... What if she asks me the same thing? There are some things it's best not to bring up. A little mystery in a relationship never hurt anyone. Though, well, moderation in all things.

Once, I dated a girl. After a year, she dumped me. I asked her why. She said she was bored in bed. With me. A whole year! I mean, come on – there's a limit to discretion. So now I wonder: why did she stay with me for a year? I didn't even think to ask... There must've been a reason! Or maybe she lied. About the sex, I mean. Just to get back at me... Not that I'm saying that because my male ego was hurt, right? It just took me by surprise, that's all. I mean, I do have a bit of a reputation for being good in bed. And you? No, I mean... you really don't want to tell me why you never fancied me, do you? (Nervous) You don't have to answer, you know...

9 – The Pleasure of Boredom

I’m bored. Aren’t you? No, but I'm not particularly bored with you. I'm bored in general. With or without you. I've always been quite bored, actually, ever since I was little. I don't know why... At first, it bothered me a bit. But then I got used to it. My wife, on the other hand, is never bored. She's lucky. She says she always has something to do. And when she truly has nothing else to do, she sleeps. As for me, I struggle with sleep. I wake up at three in the morning and can't fall back asleep. So, I'm bored. Even at night. While my wife sleeps soundly. Well, during the day, I could work, you might say. Maybe that would help me sleep better at night. But if you think working is much more fun than being bored... Work is just good for keeping busy during the day. It's like watching TV at night, doing crossword puzzles on Sundays, or playing cards on holiday. It only allows temporarily forgetting that we don't know what to do with ourselves. No, I’m bored full-time... and the worst part is, I wonder if I don't derive a certain satisfaction from it. Because there is a pleasure in being bored, right? Just as there is pleasure in being sad. A kind of nobility even. For one thing, to be bored, you need to have the leisure for it. And be able to afford it. It's a luxury not everyone can manage. Boredom is a fundamental freedom unrestricted by any hobby. Besides, I wonder if I don't prefer being bored to having fun, after all. It's true, having fun gets boring in the long run. You always end up doing the same things. Seeing the same people. Doing the same things with the same people. Whereas... there are a thousand ways of being bored... And then, having fun, between us, it's a bit vulgar, isn't it? It's noisier, for starters. Have you ever heard people having fun? The bursts of laughter, the raised voices... It's like bursts of shells. Personally, it hurts my ears. People who get bored, at least, they don't disturb anyone. I mean, people who can experience boredom quietly in their own space and have the decency to keep it to themselves. Not those who announce every five minutes that they don't know what to do. Like some children. Mine, for example... You know, it's true.Just because we've had children doesn't automatically qualify us to be recreation leaders. Otherwise, we'd have to mandate that everyone getting married and planning to have kids obtain an entertainer qualification. No, the beauty of enjoying boredom is that you can experience it anywhere. And you don't need anyone. I can find ways to be bored in any setting, even at the theatre. And with anyone – yes, even with my wife. In fact, especially with my wife. Truth be told, I still prefer to be bored in her company. Because, believe it or not, you can't share a pleasant bout of boredom with just anyone! You really have to come across someone discreet enough... And the best part is, my wife finds it entertaining when I share that with her. I'm bored, and she's having fun... Well, it's not that I don't get bored with you, but please forgive me. I have something to do right now. Something very boring, actually. So, you see, you can also be bored while doing something... Well then, enjoy your boredom...

10 – On a Tightrope

You're going to laugh, but I have absolutely no idea what I'm doing here... And you? No, I mean, do you know what I'm supposed to be doing? What I'm supposed to say? If you do, feel free to let me know, alright? I'm completely in the dark. I'm standing here like a computer someone unplugged without warning to plug in the vacuum cleaner. Or maybe it's a sudden power outage. A blackout. I should have created a backup. But who could have predicted they'd disconnect my power? Perhaps I forgot to pay the electricity bill... I'm not talking about a momentary lapse of memory, okay? In that case, I'd improvise. Keep going until it comes back to me. Until I find the thread again. Or I'd ask the prompter, right? Oh, there's no prompter anymore, that's true... There's no script either, and no author. Staff downsizing. Soon they'll be taking away the safety nets from tightrope walkers, and the words from our mouths. When they remove the nets for fishermen, and the webs for spiders, then we really need to worry... They're taking us for a ride, and we're the ones paying for the fuel. Tightrope walkers with spiders in our heads... Aren't we all a bit like that, in some way? As long as we maintain our balance and walk confidently on the tightrope, everything seems fine. However, once we lose our way... When words escape us, we might blurt out anything. We might utter things we shouldn't. And later on, all we can offer is an apologetic, "Excuse me, it slipped out." It's far from what I intended to express; in fact, it's precisely what I had hoped to keep silent about. The thought struck me, and the words spilled out involuntarily. After all, one feels compelled to say something, doesn't one? The need to break the silence takes over. Silence is more unbearable than anything, you see. Especially when people have made the effort to come hear you speak, and they've purchased their tickets. When I mention silence, I'm not limiting it to mere verbal communication, you know? A mime can be more eloquent than anyone. And I don't know if you've ever taken a bus with a group of deaf people signing to one another, but the commotion is something to behold. No, being present without uttering a word is far more challenging than engaging in meaningless chatter, trust me. However, engaging in idle talk, well, that carries its own weight. A sudden lapse of memory is like a playground slide. Like a black hole. We know we'll eventually land on our backsides, but we're uncertain about the destination. The only certainty is that once we initiate the slide, there's no turning back. Therefore, feeling a bit uneasy before taking the plunge is only natural, isn't it? Why am I sharing all this? Where is this leading? You're not saying anything, are you? You're not helping me much... But then, I'm used to it. I just came from my psychoanalyst's office. He never says anything either. You might say it saves him from talking nonsense. Strangely, all the therapists who said something to me seemed more disturbed than I am. Still. Him, I've never heard the sound of his voice. In ten years. So I just told him that we'd better leave it at that, actually. No, it really cost me too much to try every week to find something to say to him. Especially with the switch to the euro... Hence, when it went to twice a week... I won't even go there. Moreover, I don't really need to lie down anymore, now that I'm here, right? Here, I'm a bit like on the couch. With several rows of therapists listening to me in silence. And at least here, it's you who hand over the money at each session...

11 – Housework

Housework isn’t exactly my idea of fun. Don't misunderstand me; I'm not one of those meticulous old bachelors who, in the privacy of their homes, take pleasure in waxing and polishing hardwood floors. Nevertheless, I believe there's a certain quiet dignity in putting your own house in order. By firmly gripping the broom handle, you stay firmly grounded in reality. Remember, from dust we came, and to dust we shall return, sweeping ourselves away. Cleaning your own toilet bowl requires a certain humility. A certain modesty, I dare say. Furthermore, I would assert that doing your own cleaning is a sign of good mental hygiene and serves as a safeguard against numerous follies. I'm not referring to personal quirks. No, I'm talking about defending democracy. The mop represents the ultimate bulwark against tyranny. Would Hitler have invaded Poland if he had to wield a vacuum first? Would Pol Pot have enthusiastically exterminated his own people if he could have spent his time chasing dust bunnies at home? No, we've never seen a dictator doing housework. Hiring a maid is already daydreaming of becoming a domestic tyrant. It's the first step towards megalomania. It's the symbolic annexation of Poland! Genius, on the other hand, isn't an enemy of housekeeping. One can easily envision Archimedes formulating his theorem while standing at his sink, adorned with rubber gloves: every hand immersed in water experiences a vertical upward force equal to the weight of the displaced dishwater. And if museums abound with still lifes showcasing fruit bowls, vegetable peelings and bloody steaks, it's because the great masters of painting devoted significant time to their kitchens. Engaging a house cleaner, mark my words, is a form of intellectual laziness. No, let me retract that: it's the original sin! The first abandonment of one's responsibilities as a person, ushering in a cascade of subsequent abdications. The small compromise with your conscience that allows for all future compromises. It's the origin of capitalism! The beginning of the exploitation of man by man. More precisely, the exploitation of the house cleaner by man, or by the executive woman, who, as you will agree, is no longer quite a woman. Because you must at least have the honesty to face the truth: the major cleaning that you refuse to do at your own place, for fear of getting your hands dirty, will have to be done by someone else on your behalf. The pumice stone you hesitate to wield, fearing skin damage, will need another Pilate to handle it for you. Another person whom you'll despise for their servility, or at least look down on to make them pay for your own cowardice. Ever wonder why people often pay their house cleaners off the books, and without a shred of guilt, no less? It's because we can't genuinely perceive doing someone else's cleaning as a legitimate job. Even less so work deserving a wage and granting social rights. Thus, we seek an excuse. We assert that if we didn't have more important tasks, we would undoubtedly handle it ourselves—tasks like washing the dining room windows and scrubbing the toilet seat. We contend that our preference to delegate is not born out of laziness; quite the contrary, it stems from a sense of dedication. Almost self-denial! To avoid depriving the rest of humanity of the many benefits we couldn't provide if we were forced to do the cleaning ourselves. Do you see where I'm going with this when I talked about humility... Okay, we can't go against nature either. It's obvious that a normally constituted man isn't genetically equipped to handle a steam iron. But still... That's why society invented marriage. Sharing household chores, indeed. However, everyone retains their dignity. So, in this noble shared domestic servitude, the couple can become what it should never

have stopped being: a household. Didn't Voltaire say that we must cultivate our garden? He didn't find it necessary to add that we should also peel our vegetables, serve ourselves soup, and clean the bowls afterward, but it was implied. Truly I tell you, the house cleaner is not at all the future of mankind. And when the world's leaders are constitutionally obligated to attend to their own little laundry, the fragrance of lavender will envelop all of humanity.

12 – Just Like Before

Do you remember? Those were the good old days... Or so they say. Or so we like to believe. But were things really so wonderful back then? At least it was a beginning. The beginning of everything. The very first of the Mohicans. Religion is the ritualisation of an imaginary memory. At first we stand dreaming outside the windows of grand restaurants, outside places where under-eighteens aren't allowed. And when we're finally old enough to go in, what we miss is the hunger we felt at the start. Those good old days when we still had an appetite. When curiosity had not yet become a vice. Ataraxia isn't a childhood illness. It's an excuse that helps the elderly accept their fate. To escape it, we'd have to reverse the order of the courses that history keeps serving us. Sit down at the table with empty pockets. Let our appetite grow as we eat. And never quite have enough. But streams become rivers, and little blood vessels become great arteries. All our lives we wait for the happy accident that will change our course. And when it finally comes, our hearts are no longer in it. Unless it's a heart attack... Old age is a shipwreck that doesn't always end well. Save our souls. Or at least find them a desert island, somewhere to wash up on the shore and begin all over again. Where on earth did we go wrong? I still ask myself: is this monumental mess the result of some distant misunderstanding that an honest explanation, however late, could have cleared up? Or is it simply the inevitable outcome of an endless dialogue of the deaf? Come to think of it, perhaps, if we're clever enough, we might remember being apes. Or even climbing plants. Sometimes, in this jungle, I remember when I was as supple as a vine. When that sheer exhilaration was enough to turn desire into fulfilment.

13 – The Stand-In

Hello! I'm the replacement. So let me introduce myself, because I'm not sure everyone knows me. I'm God. No, but please, remain seated. No need to stand, seriously. I know, at first, it's a bit intimidating, but you'll see, you'll quickly get used to my presence. Soon you won't even see me, and you'll act as if I don't exist. Just like with my predecessor. Now, of course, you're probably wondering how one becomes God, it's only natural. You might be thinking, 'Okay, he's escaped from the asylum, along with his buddy who believes he's Napoleon.' No, but I don't think of myself as Jesus Christ, alright? Everyone knows that Jesus Christ died 2,000 years ago. And I didn't have the look for Jesus, you know? It wouldn't fly. It wouldn't be believable. And truth be told, it wouldn't be accurate! But now, God – that's another matter entirely. God has no particular look. He's this omnipresent force, everywhere yet nowhere to be seen. When you talk to Him, He remains silent. And let's be honest, He hasn't exactly been making waves lately, has He? I mean, just look at the Church's struggles to recognise a couple of posthumous miracles... And even when they manage to approve one, it's not exactly leaving the audience awestruck. I mean, it's not like I misplaced the keys to my 4x4, watched the Pope on TV, and poof! Miraculously, they reappeared in the lining of my jacket. Or dealt with colon cancer, endured 23 rounds of chemo, had my entire intestine removed, and took a pilgrimage to Lourdes, only to miraculously emerge with a stomach tube and an artificial anus. It's a far cry from the Red Sea parting or water skiing barefoot on the Sea of Galilee without a speedboat, isn't it? Well, between us, that did have some bloody style. It's understandable that back then, it might have inspired vocations. Sure, God created the world. The Big Bang, Adam and Eve, the dinosaurs, all in just one little week. It's true; at the beginning, He did quite a job. But since then...? Nowadays, God is more of an honorary title. Almighty, you say... He has about as much power as the Queen of England, really. So I thought to myself, Bernard, there's a vacancy. Yes, I probably shouldn't spill the beans, but before becoming God, my name was Bernard... Alright, it's unpaid work, but you know... The Pope isn't in it for the money either. But to become Pope, you've still got to hit the books. You've got to put in your application, go through the elections... To be God, you don't bother with all that hassle. Well, starting to be God is like quitting smoking. Initially, it's not a piece of cake... After that, you just have to stick with it, that's all... It's a matter of willpower, you see. You just have to believe in yourself. If you don't believe in yourself... So, I know why you're here, right. Not for the small collection at the end. What you're hoping for when you turn to me is that I'll bring you the good word. For instance, you're hoping I'll discreetly reveal the jackpot numbers for the next sports lottery, complete with the bonus ball. Well, that's not quite how it works. I'm not here to make you plead, but, you know... If it were as simple as asking, everyone would know. No, I won't do more than my predecessor, but I assure you, I'll take the job seriously. You won't see me either, but I'll always be by your side, just like Him. So, just give me a call—be it a sick child, looming layoffs, or a family tragedy. A swift phone call, and I'll be on the scene. Day or night, rain or shine. I'll leave my mobile number at the front desk. You'll have to foot the bill for the call, but, you know... If I don't pick up, leave a message on my voicemail... (*Looking at his watch*) Oh, there... It's not that I'm bored, but duty calls elsewhere. I can be everywhere, certainly, but not everywhere at once.

Take my word for it: give it a week or two, you won't even notice the difference from the previous guy.

14 – Talking About the Weather

Strange weather, isn't it? You never know what to wear. Are things getting better, or can we already be sure they're getting worse? Is it even worth getting dressed? Seasonal weather, they call it. Is it really worth talking about? Still, we have to go out, don't we? We have to talk. Whatever the weather. If only to empty the bin and fill the fridge. If we listened to ourselves for once, we'd stay at home. Stay in bed. Talking about sunshine and rain. But apparently we already spend thirty years of our lives asleep. Just imagine if we started lying in. One way or another, we spend a good many years talking to ourselves. And talking to nobody. As children, we speak to people who ought to exist. In old age, we speak to people who no longer do. In between, as adults, we mostly prefer the sound of our own voices. Other people are there simply to provide an echo. We talk to walls that have no ears, and dogs that cannot answer. We shout at people who cannot hear and use sign language with people who cannot see. Everyone talks at once. And when there's nothing left to say, everyone listens to themselves at once. We talk to ourselves because we're afraid of the dark. And we talk into the void, trying to fill it. If we're lucky enough to have something to tell ourselves, we can be our own audience. Lend ourselves a sympathetic ear. Listening to what we have to say is as important as listening to everyone else. So we talk to ourselves, and listen to ourselves talking. But we don't tell ourselves everything. We lie to ourselves. And if we're persuasive enough, we even start believing we're somebody... Thirty years asleep. Life is a dream. Half of it, anyway. The other half is a lie, with a few moments of truth that may be better left unsaid. Looks as though it's clearing up, doesn't it? A fine night ahead. Look, you can see the stars. It's almost as if they're speaking to us. I'm sure there's somebody up there. Somebody with ears, though not necessarily God. People who speak to one another, or don't. People who talk to themselves, or have stopped talking altogether. People who tell themselves stories until they believe them. People who also speak into the void. At night, sometimes, I listen for those inhabitants of the sky. Do you think that one day we'll be able to talk to them? About sunshine and rain?

15 – Our Father Who Art Within Us

If we passed each other in the street as we'll be thirty years from now, do you think we'd recognise one another? It's hard to say... Well, I don't mean you and me in particular. We hardly know each other. There's little chance I'd remember you. Especially since in thirty years, you'll have aged quite a bit. You'll be unrecognisable if you're still around... No, what I mean is, suppose tomorrow I unexpectedly met myself thirty years older. Would my own face seem familiar? Thirty years ago, I had long hair, rode a motorbike and read rock magazines. If I passed myself on the underground today, balding and reading the financial pages, would I recognise myself? Would I, at the very least, ponder: 'Well, that's peculiar – that older gentleman looks somewhat familiar. He resembles my father a bit.' In that case, I might not be eager to engage in a conversation with my future self anymore. Over the course of thirty years, we undergo considerable changes, often not for the better. Are we truly unchanged, or do we inevitably evolve into versions of our own fathers? The fear of dying one day is a common concern, but our worry may be misplaced. We don't experience death in a single day—except, perhaps, by accident. When we die of old age, we die a little more each day. Eventually, we forget who we once were. We're all destined to become unknown soldiers. If you have the chance to live for another thirty years, it won't be you they lay to rest; it'll be someone else. Someone unfamiliar, someone you've never crossed paths with and will never encounter. A stranger who may not even be someone you'd find agreeable. Because let's face it: we don't tend to improve with age. Keep in mind that if you don't particularly appreciate yourself now, thirty years from today, you might find it hard to tolerate the person you've evolved into. Maybe you'll even wish for their death. Don't we all, more or less, desire our father's death? You'll blame him for not cherishing you like a son. And he'll resent you for not fulfilling his dreams. To understand our father, we would need to have known him as a child. But even then... When I gaze into the mirror each morning, I struggle to recognize myself, and I can't find anything interesting to say to myself. So if I were to face a guy like me with thirty more years on him... A guy who might never exist, by the way. If we knew our date of death at birth, we'd know when we've lived half our life... No, intergenerational communication, even with oneself, is not easy. But here's a piece of advice: if you meet yourself tomorrow as you'll be in thirty, forty, fifty years, offer this prayer: Our Father who art within us, may our name remain familiar to you, may your reign's end be peaceful, may your lack of will not condemn our dreams, give us each day a reason to live to your age, forgive our wanderings as we must also forgive your resignation, let us succumb to temptation, and free yourself from remorse.

16 – Making It Snow

You can stay seated! I am... your new philosophy teacher. I know, up until now, you mostly knew me as the physical education instructor... But, as you may be aware, Mrs Weird, I mean Mrs Weir, tragically took her own life last night by setting herself alight in a bathtub full of unleaded petrol... Oh, you weren't aware? I apologize. Regardless, due to a current shortage of philosophy teachers in the school system... for some reason, philosophers are going through a recruitment crisis, much like priests... The headteacher asked that I fill in for Mrs Weird. Weir. You know, in our profession these days, you have to be versatile... You need to adapt. When you have a job, if you manage to find one, they'll expect you to adapt. They call it employability. Well, that's what the headteacher told me. I understand, you have your final school exams at the end of the year, but... it was either me or nothing... So, you might as well learn to adapt right away. Well, if you don't have any questions, let's get started. So, in the end, what is philosophy? It's not that complicated, is it? It's about asking the fundamental questions. I mean, the pointless questions. Like... I don't know... What's this mess around us? How did this chaos start? Will this craziness ever end? Wherever Mrs Weird is now, she might finally hold the answers to these questions. Unfortunately, she can’t come back to tell us whether there’s life after the petrol... I mean, life after death. She’s completely charred. So, for your exams, it seems we'll have to figure things out on our own, right? Anyway, philosophers have been asking these kinds of absurd questions for millennia, without managing to find an explanation that makes any sense. Well, believe it or not, even though I've never studied philosophy, I think I've found the answer. Well... a beginning of an answer... The key is to go back to basics. If you look carefully, you'll realise the answer lies within yourself. No need to wade through the unreadable books Mrs Weird distributed in the bibliography at the start of the year. I can't say for certain whether she had read all those books herself, but look where it got her... Well, trust me, it's better for each of you to draw from your own experiences and tap into your own memories. I'm confident that at some point in your life, you've encountered the truth without even realising it. For me, it happened during a pilgrimage to Mont Saint-Michel, where I experienced what you might call a revelation... Initially, I wasn't overly excited about the prospect of visiting Mont Saint-Michel. I mean, my wife was more enthusiastic about it. But let's be honest, Mont Saint-Michel is one of those places you should experience at least once in your life, right? Plus, the bus trip was sponsored by the town hall. Anyway, my wife and I arrived at the parking lot around noon after a three-hour drive in dense fog, not even able to make a pit stop at a petrol station. There was no time to waste because we had to return to Paris that evening, so it was kind of a commando operation, you know? So everyone swiftly disembarked from the bus and started making their way briskly toward the basilica. Even though we don't really believe in God, here's a meditative atmosphere that envelops the place. We were approximately halfway there when my wife remarked, "Isn't it unbelievable? Mont Saint-Michel is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and if we don't take action, it might not even be an island in a few years." At that moment, I must confess I didn't quite grasp where she was leading the conversation. With the low tide, Mont Saint-Michel, shrouded in fog, appeared more like a massive mound on the beach. Nevertheless, it triggered some contemplation within me, and I found myself pondering. Why Mont Saint-Michel instead of nothing? Why my wife instead

of someone else? Why the prospect of an island during high tide, but not during low tide? Meanwhile, we were nearing the basilica. The cold was biting! It was December, just a few days before Christmas. Maybe that had something to do with it too. As I ascended the hill, an unusual sensation stirred within me. I held a firm belief that in this sacred place, I would uncover answers to questions I had never even considered before. However, being a bit out of breath, chilled to the bone, and having promised my mother-in-law a souvenir from Mont Saint-Michel, I decided to step into a nearby souvenir shop. Well, souvenirs were certainly not in short supply there. Anyway, I scanned the shop, hoping to find something budget-friendly for my mother-in-law. Then, almost miraculously, I came across one of those small glass domes filled with water and featuring Mont Saint-Michel inside. You know the ones, right? They do a similar thing in Paris with the Eiffel Tower. Absentmindedly, I picked up the item and, as if guided by a force other than my own, started shaking it.

You won't believe what happened next – snow began to fall! I mean, initially, in the crystal ball, of course. But then, I casually glanced towards the door, and what do you know? It had started snowing outside too! That's when it dawned on me in an epiphany of cosmic proportions. This crystal ball wasn't just a trinket; it was a miniature universe! The world was literally in the palm of my hands. I stood there, basking in the glow of this newfound revelation. I stared at the ball, then looked outside. The more I shook the ball, the more it snowed on Mont Saint-Michel. I was all-powerful. I was the Almighty! Well, after a while, since the shopkeeper was starting to shoot me odd glances, I reluctantly had to set the ball down. Slowly but surely, all the snow gracefully settled back down, and I snapped back to reality. Yet, since that whimsical moment, I've been enlightened: the world is basically a snow globe where you can decipher both the past and the future. You give it a shake, and it's akin to the Big Bang. The snowflakes never land in the same place, in the same sequence, or at the same pace, but eventually, every flake finds its way to the ground. Then, with another shake, it all starts anew. It's perpetually different, yet fundamentally the same. No two snowflakes are identical; they each chart their unique course, but in the grand scheme, there's always the same volume of snow, and, inevitably, everything descends downward, you catch my drift? Well, I haven't figured out yet who's shaking the thing, and why, but... I have my little theory. Why do you think all the fools who enter a souvenir shop at Mont Saint-Michel feel an irresistible urge to shake the thing I'm talking about? It's all for the sheer joy of watching the snow fall! So, if God exists, why wouldn't He want to do the same? And brace yourselves, because that’s not all... What if, in the end, God was me? I mean, all of you too, if you want. Well, the sum of all the idiots of our species, right? Admit it, it's mind-boggling, isn't it? That's precisely why when the headteacher asked me if I had some knowledge of philosophy to replace Mrs Weird, I said yes right away. I believe it was a sign from destiny, you know? An opportunity for me to generously share the knowledge I have modestly acquired about the mysteries of the world that surrounds us with as many people as possible...

Well, I think that'll do for today. Let's not set the bar too high for our first session, after all. Alright, now everyone get down on your stomachs! We're going to do some push-ups together to wrap it up. A sound mind in a sound body, as the headteacher likes to say.

17 – Half a New Year’s Address

My dear fellow citizens, this year's address will be only half as long as usual. For here we are, on 31 December at eight in the evening, in a state of emergency, and time is running out. To begin with, there's a turkey waiting for me at home, and it's going to be a tough one. I may have overdone things: I'm not even sure it'll fit into the oven in one piece. At an hour's cooking per kilo, I probably won't get to tuck into it before the middle of January. But never mind that enormous turkey. Let us return to you, my dear fellow citizens. As Head of State, it is my duty to warn you of the disastrous situation in which our country finds itself as I speak. When the year began, we had 365 days ahead of us. Today only one remains. That is how relentlessly our national deficit grows, day after day, year after year. Rest assured, I have just prayed to God to extend our credit by a few months, in His infinite mercy. But I must warn you: we cannot go on spending time we do not have. That is why I have decided that, from 1 January, only one day in every two will be replaced. The coming year will therefore last just six months. It will begin on 1 January and end on 30 June, when I shall address you again to wish you a happy New Year. I understand, of course, that these reforms, so essential to our country, will demand some adjustment. But thanks to global warming, you will soon be unable to tell one season from another, and all years will seem exactly alike. Those without a summer will merely seem a little more miserable than the rest. In keeping with this reform, which will also double the yield of all taxes collected annually, I have decided on a further bold measure: the abolition of the twice-yearly change between summer and winter time, which has divided our nation for years. From now on, there will be only one time — and only six months of it each year! My dear fellow citizens, I wish you an excellent half-year. I believe in the good side of the Force, and I shall not abandon you. Long live the Republic of sheep, and half long live our country!

18 – Don’t Make Me Laugh

Make love, not war... Remember that? People used to say it during the Vietnam War. Unfortunately, long before Vietnam, people were perfectly capable of making love and war at the same time. And of course they carried on afterwards. Love and war get along famously, you know. They've always made an excellent couple. Take the Trojan War. The one that really happened. The first more or less respectable war in history. It was a love story! Well, a sex story, which amounts to much the same thing. Paris sleeps with the beautiful Helen. To get that fool of a woman back, Menelaus sends his rival a Trojan horse to disrupt his plans, and the cuckold ends up razing the entire city. I don't know whether you've heard, but Troy isn't there any more. Wiped off the map. So if you were planning to spend your summer holidays there, or go there on your honeymoon, you'll have to find somewhere else.

And speaking of honeymoons, don't imagine that being in love discourages a man from invading Poland or exterminating half of humanity because they don't look like him. I'm sure Adolf was deeply in love with Eva. There's proof: they killed themselves together straight after their wedding. Perhaps they decided the best was already behind them, and there was no point paying for the worst. Two one-way tickets to hell. What a peculiar honeymoon. No, when love isn't eternal rest, it's simply a soldier's rest. A hurried embrace behind a church while on leave, between two massacres, before heading back to the front. That's for lovers who go to war in the old-fashioned way, two or three times a century, a great war between little soldiers, out in the fields or flattening cities.

But what about war between people who love one another? The everyday war, the war indoors, domestic guerrilla warfare? That works perfectly well too. What do you think is one of the main causes of homicide in peacetime? Crimes of passion and domestic violence. For every two lovers kissing on a park bench, how many married couples end up throwing punches at each other on the living-room sofa? Make love, not war... Don't make me laugh. If you want my opinion, the slogan should be: Make jokes, not war. Have you ever seen two soldiers disembowelling each other while roaring with laughter? Or two lovers slapping each other between fits of giggles? I haven't. Unless only one of them is laughing: the one with all the power.

Admittedly, tyrants and sadists often love a good laugh, in public or in private. That doesn't mean they have a sense of humour. Ever noticed? The least funny people often laugh the loudest. But only at their own stupid jokes. Humour isn't a solitary pleasure, and it certainly isn't something you force on someone else. It isn't about laughing at anything, in front of anyone, on the assumption that hilarity is a socially transmitted disease. You can't laugh wholeheartedly at someone else's expense. Humour is a consolation prize you give yourself, and then share with others. An act of public-spirited kindness.

They say that to seduce a woman, you should first make her laugh. Perhaps women assume that a man who takes the trouble to make them laugh, instead of laughing at his own jokes, may also be considerate enough to share the pleasure they might give him. Love or war? Both, General! Make love, not war? You're joking... Make jokes, not war! And as for everything else, generally speaking... Just leave us in peace.

19 – Here or There

I like coming here... It's in the shade. There's no noise. Usually there aren't many people around. And if you happen to bump into someone, you don't have to make conversation. And that silence... Out in the countryside you've got birds. And planes. Airports are always outside cities, in the middle of fields, and to get from one city to another, planes have to fly over the countryside. Planes make even more noise than birds. And then there are the fighters. Not people hunting game birds, at least their season is limited. I mean fighter aircraft. Fighter-bombers. For them, the hunting season lasts all year. They don't practise aerobatics over the centre of Paris, do they? Except once a year, perhaps, on the national holiday. The rest of the time city people are left in peace. No, military pilots practise over fields of wheat, among the crows. Getting ready for the next war.

Well, wars are generally fought in the countryside, aren't they? They're an outdoor activity. For one thing, there's more room to manoeuvre. And war is like camping: you make rather less mess if you do it in the country. Verdun is a tiny town surrounded by plenty of fields. It even has a campsite. War in the open air leaves hardly any traces. The dead are collected and buried in fields of honour. White crosses grow there, neatly arranged on immaculate lawns. War in the countryside causes almost no damage. Before long it becomes a bad memory, and then a vague one. After a successful military campaign the battlefields get ploughed. All that's left is to sow the next crop. Perhaps call in the air force just before harvest to spray the last pests with insecticide or drop water bombs on any remaining brush fires.

Putting a landscape back in order is so much easier than endlessly rebuilding flattened cities exactly as they were. Have you noticed that when a city is destroyed in war, if one building is still standing, it's always a church? They call it a miracle. Fair enough. But it's the one building that's no practical use to anyone. We'd do better to bomb only places of worship, outside service times. Fewer casualties that way. Or simply agree to fight our wars in open country. No, nature is much less peaceful than city dwellers imagine. So when I want a little tranquillity, I prefer to come here. To seek sanctuary in my own little chapel.

Here... Can you believe it? Isn't it extraordinary? Every moment of our lives up to now has brought us to precisely this spot, at precisely this instant. Our long and arduous journey. Every train we caught and every train we missed. Every brush with death, every risk we didn't take. Every woman we never had, and every woman who left us. Ten years, twenty, forty, eighty... All that, just to end up here. Out of breath. Our curriculum vitae. A whole life spent running. Surely we can sit down for five minutes and think about it. In an hour we'll be far away again. Somewhere else. Moving once more. Swept back into the whirlpool. The drain of life drawing us inexorably to the bottom of the pool with the water.

Time passes. There's nothing we can do. It flows right through our bodies even if, exhausted by the struggle, we fold our arms and stand still in passive resistance. So we spend our lives moving from one place to another to pass the time. Travelling, occasionally. Mostly pacing up and down. Coming and going. Here and there. Back and forth. Going round in circles. Imagine being able to watch, all at once, at the end of your life, every journey you've made since birth. Like one of those films shown at

high speed. That's what we are: the sum of our movements traced in dotted lines. Our roads and wrong turns. Our parallel lines that never meet. The luminous arabesque we draw with our own breath, from where we started to where we arrive. Nowhere. Until the light goes out. I like coming here, to make friends with the darkness.

20 – Death Valley

Behind us the road stretches away, endlessly, until it disappears. The bus stops at the roadside and we stagger down, dazzled by the blazing sun, stiff from what feels like an eternity of staring straight ahead towards this terminus that is also a new departure. Without a word, we walk into the lunar landscape. There is nothing before us now but desert. We bend to pick up a few stones, which we throw at other stones, all alike and all different. We avoid each other's eyes. We've already said so much. We were drunk on words. And now we feel sick. We stand there for a long time in silence, our throats tight, until slowly we learn to speak again. To make plans. To dream our lives once more, like a riddle.

My first will go to Sofia. To become a failed poet. Are there successful poets? A little too fond of drink. My first has never been to Sofia. Nobody goes there. There's no reason to go. That's precisely why he'll go. In the back rooms of smoky cafés, at tables covered with empty bottles, he'll pursue the words of a foreign language forever, turning them into bad verse. He won't be remembered by posterity. Not even Bulgarian posterity. He'll simply be a poet. Because you don't become a poet. Because poets don't really exist. Certainly not in Sofia. Then one day, soaked in alcohol and nicotine, he'll collapse onto his table in the middle of a long unfinished poem. But he'll have been faithful to his word. To the very end.

My second will go to Paris. He'll open a grocery shop on Rue Alexandre Dumas. One of those little shops run by immigrants, open at all hours. At night, on Saturdays, on Sundays. My second will never leave his shop. He'll serve customers, making conversation and telling jokes. Always the same conversation. The same jokes. More nonsensical every time. Until one day the words he uses, though they're still the same words, will cease to mean anything at all. They'll become a dead language unknown to everyone, even to him. Then he'll close the grocery shop: Closed Due to Aphasia. He'll go to the station and take a train to Bucharest. In the morning, after a dreamless night, he'll wake on a grimy but sunlit platform crowded with hurrying people and vendors selling soft drinks made in Romania.

And then, in the stream of moving travellers, my second will spot my first, standing perfectly still, miraculously resurrected, never actually dead, suntanned, wearing shorts and canvas shoes. My first will have found my second again. Our words will recover their meaning, becoming a long poem endlessly begun again, never committed to paper. Then I'll leave the station and sit at a café terrace. I'll order Turkish coffee, and while the grounds settle I'll look my destiny in the face. I'll stay awake late into a night that has only one tomorrow. And when day breaks, it will be morning. Ahead of me, the road will stretch away, endlessly, until it disappears.

21 – Slide Show

Telling the story of your life is rather like putting on a slide show. Other people are rarely as fascinated by the pictures as we are by the memories attached to them. But in the age of selfies, who remembers the sleep-inducing charm of those old-fashioned slide evenings? For younger audiences, an explanation is needed. Back when an adventurous journey to the ends of the earth might take you to Morocco, Greece or even southern Corsica, a couple returning from their annual holiday would invite their most loyal friends to a buffet inspired by the exotic destination. Then, over coffee, came the reward: a projection of their holiday photographs onto the white living-room wall. Naturally, these intrepid travellers had first sorted hundreds of slides into trays by subject, carefully choosing their order so that the whole thing would have as much meaning as possible. Taking photographs was only half the skill; you also had to master editing. As the host pressed the button on a wired remote control to advance each slide, the machine made a noise like a photocopier. Click-clack. Mishaps were common, of course. A tray inserted back to front, a slide upside down, and the whole show had to stop while everything was put right. No one could be allowed to miss a single moment, or misunderstand the message. The result was an interminable film shown in slow motion, with the projectionist providing live commentary on every frame. You had to be a true friend to endure the ordeal with a smile, pretending to marvel at such exotic wonders. What an adventure! But revenge would come. The following year, those friends would inflict their own holiday film on their hosts. Having seen the world, and being seen back home. A way of existing, if only briefly. Everyone taking a turn in the spotlight. Always among their own circle. Happy the travellers who had made such a wonderful journey. Today, in an age of real-time communication, we narrate our lives while we are living them. Instead of living them, even. The existence of the image comes before the essence of the journey. Globalisation has done away with the very idea of the exotic. Travel is now mere movement. There is no elsewhere, only other places. No memories, and even fewer futures. Only an eternal present. Until holograms and artificial intelligence allow us to be everywhere at once, forever. Like God. But what for? I come from a vanished world in which the only hologram was the reflection in the hall mirror, and intelligence — like stupidity — was still entirely natural.

22 – The Manaus Opera House

Manaus is an island, lost in an ocean of forest. You can reach it only by plane or by boat, along that great waterway, the Amazon, longer than many journeys across an ocean and so wide that from one bank you cannot see the other with the naked eye. Over time, carried by currents, storms and shipwrecks, countless solitary voyagers, some from the surrounding forest and others from the far side of the world, have washed up on this once deserted and now overcrowded island, never finding their way home. Condemned to live together, they share the island fate of humanity itself. Inexperienced sailors aboard a drunken boat, they came hoping for an easy life and a quick fortune.

To attract customers like flies to sticky paper, Manaus was declared a free-trade zone. A kind of tax haven. Above all, a mirage. An enormous discount store where everything is for sale, duty-free and, of course, on credit. A lifetime exchanged for a television and a fridge, when you can't even afford the electricity. Death for the dream of a gold nugget. The grim reality of a miner's life. Having answered the sirens' call, these freshwater sailors slowly drown themselves in alcohol. Like every gold-seeker passing through the city on the way to dig into the bowels of the earth deep in the forest, I knew, somewhere in the back of my mind, that I would never find in broad daylight what I had come to look for here, in the heart of darkness. But some journeys cannot be avoided without missing an appointment with yourself.

When a European arrives in a city of the New World, instinctively he often looks, like a sailor searching for a lighthouse, for the oldest monument in sight. Even if it's in ruins. A few old stones piled together like a comforting cairn left for an overconfident traveller lost in the mist. I knew Manaus had an opera house. Naturally I didn't expect to find myself suddenly on a grand Parisian boulevard in the middle of the Amazon, but the prospect of drinking a coffee while admiring the façade of a historic building was reassuring. I'm not an opera lover. I hardly ever go to the opera at home. But if people who built opera houses had once lived here, perhaps other traces of their supposedly civilising presence remained. Something to make the brutality of this sprawling, filthy oasis more bearable, lost in a desert that grows ever more crowded beneath a forest that grows less and less untouched.

In the diesel-sheened waters of Manaus harbour, between boats unloading cargoes of duty-free appliances and clothes made in China, children swim naked among every kind of rubbish. They laugh, like children everywhere. Almost everywhere. Even life is cheap in a tax haven. For children whose births go unregistered, existence carries no guarantee. There was indeed a café opposite the opera house. But the building's façade was being restored and was completely hidden behind a sheet of scaffolding. An enormous screen concealing the city's principal attraction, as though to prevent passing tourists from taking its memory away in a photograph. I went to Manaus. I never saw the opera house. Life is a journey. Its destination, an appointment we fail to keep.

23 – Return to Ithaca

Writing is an Odyssey. Reconstructing your route from memory in the vain hope of finding your way back. All the way to the beginning. Only to discover that the journey exists on the maps, that the point of origin is not the point of departure, and that the search for truth is a game of bluff with yourself. My lost paradise is the Mediterranean. As the child of an exile, for years I wanted my father to be a hero. A member of the resistance, gloriously defeated. But in 1939 my father was only a teenager. A displaced victim. In fact, I never heard him say anything bad about Franco. Yet I so wanted to think of myself as the son of a utopian dream.

For my father, to tell the truth, General Franco was rather like General de Gaulle: moral order, social peace and economic miracles. Perhaps the resemblance between their names helped. Franco. France. De Gaulle. Gaul. Yes, even among the refugees who later returned home as tourists, there were those who said life had been better under Franco. For years I was proud that my father hadn't had me baptised. I chose to see it as a symbolic act of resistance. Unfortunately, it was merely an oversight. My father hadn't even gone to the town hall to register my name. Why would he have taken me to church to have me baptised? No, disbelief in God doesn't turn a refugee into a resistance fighter. And I ought to have questioned the anticlerical convictions of a father who sent me to a Catholic boarding school for seven years.

It was my uncle who improvised my first name at the registry office. I can still hear that cheerful car-factory worker laughing as he told the story: 'Jean-Pierre Belmondo!' So I ought to have been called Jean-Paul. My surname is collateral damage from a civil war and a defeat. My first name is the product of indifference and a slip of the tongue. What a peculiar secular baptism. Misunderstandings. Mistakes. Contradictions. Do all these accidents add up to a destiny? Of course, my father wasn't a Franco supporter either. He was simply a survivor, not a hero. Not a guerrilla fighter, but someone who knew how to get by. Plenty of ambition, and a little black-market trading. Three years of civil war and an exodus. Six years of world war and exile. Quite an education. Not one great battle but a succession of retreats. Not one wound but a great many scars. It makes you resilient. It doesn't make you a member of the Resistance.

And me? Something of a Gaullist too, perhaps, though a Gaullist of the left. A Franco-Gaul from Barcelona, and not even Catalan. Son of an imagined republican and of the French Republic. Before I even knew how to write, I knew writing would be my only homeland. I am the author of my own days. Writing is an Odyssey, a long journey back to yourself. I have made that voyage against wind and tide, staking my life on it to win my freedom.

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:

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

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