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Family Portrait

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Family Portrait

Jean-Pierre Martinez
English translation by the author

Two brothers and two sisters, who scarcely see one another any more, meet for the last time at the family holiday home to sell it after their mother's death. But the accounts they have to settle are not merely financial...

Characters:

Pierre

Josiane

Jeff

Frédérique

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Morning

A sparsely furnished living room in a family holiday home. At the back is a small fireplace, with no fire burning. Pierre, who looks like a left-wing intellectual, comes in from the kitchen carrying a saucepan of hot water and sets it on the table beside a large jar of Nescafé. He searches every compartment of a crockery cupboard and finally finds a cup in the last one. He goes through the drawers in search of a teaspoon. Pierre sits down, makes himself a coffee and attacks the last few Pépitos biscuits in a packet. A mobile phone rings offstage. He sips his coffee and finishes the biscuits while reading La Vie Financière. A headline establishes the period: "Y2K Bug: Financial Markets Anxious as the New Millennium Approaches." A pause. Jeff comes in wearing striped pyjamas, half asleep and moving on autopilot.

Jeff *(yawning)* – Already dressed?

Pierre *(still reading his magazine)* – I can't stand hanging around in my pyjamas. There's hot water and Nes...

To Pierre's surprise, Jeff goes straight to the right cupboard and drawer, takes out a cup and teaspoon, sits down and makes himself a coffee. He picks up the biscuit packet hopefully, then puts it down again, crestfallen, when he finds it empty.

Jeff – No Pépitos left...?

Pierre, who has apparently eaten the lot, shows no sign of remorse.

Pierre – Well, obviously not...

Jeff doesn't look happy but says nothing. Pierre adds more.

Pierre – You sound just like Mum... When we asked her, "Is there any chocolate left?" she'd say, "Well, of course not, you eat it all whenever there is any!"

Jeff chooses not to respond. Pierre moves on.

Pierre *(sighing)* – I didn't sleep a wink last night. That storm...

Jeff – What storm?

Pierre *(incredulous)* – Don't tell me you didn't hear it! It sounded like artillery fire...

Jeff shows no reaction. Pierre watches his brother with the curiosity of an anthropologist.

Pierre – You've always been a bit of a sleepwalker, haven't you?

Jeff's only response is to stir his coffee mechanically.

Pierre – Remember that time we woke you at eleven at night and told you you'd slept through your alarm? We let you have breakfast and everything... Mum caught you outside, on your way to school in your pyjamas. On a Sunday in August...

Jeff starts sipping his coffee without responding.

Pierre *(returning to the present)* – I'd only just got back to sleep when the rubbish lorry woke me up! Always the same time... Five in the morning. It certainly didn't wake us when we were twenty. We used to get home at the same time as the dustmen...

Jeff – Mmm...

Pierre *(surprised)* – So you slept all right, then?

Jeff – I'm a bit worn out. It's a long drive when you're the only one at the wheel. Why did you never get your driving licence?

Pierre – I took the test. I failed.

Jeff – Once! You could have tried again...

Pierre – I can't stand failure. Clearly I wasn't meant to drive. And when I see the idiots on the roads... You saw yesterday, didn't you? Even you nearly lost your temper! Take a perfectly decent, polite, well-balanced man. Put him behind a steering wheel and within ten minutes he's insulting everyone and ready to start a fight. How do you explain that?

Thrown by his brother's lack of response, Pierre gets up and surveys the room.

Pierre – Nothing's changed. I haven't been here for at least fifteen years. What about you?

Jeff – Two years, with Catherine and the kids. But never in winter.

Pierre approaches the fireplace, blowing on his hands to warm them.

Pierre – I understand why...

He stops by the fireplace. On the mantelpiece are a large box of matches, a carbide lamp and a hand-coloured black-and-white school photograph showing the two brothers in blue smocks and their two sisters in pink ones.

Pierre – Do you think it works?

Jeff – We always came in August... No one has ever used it.

Pierre – That doesn't mean it doesn't work...

Pierre looks around.

Pierre – We already have the matches. We just need the wood...

Jeff gestures for him to forget it. Pierre starts examining the room as though carrying out an inventory.

Pierre – When do we sign at the notary's?

Jeff – At three. If the buyer hasn't changed his mind.

Pierre rubs his hands again to warm them.

Pierre – If he saw it in the summer, he may well have...

He glances out of the window.

Pierre – Do you know who this guy is?

Jeff – What guy?

Pierre – The buyer!

Jeff – I spoke to him once on the phone. He's a Parisian. A physiotherapist, I think...

Pierre – Is he nice?

Jeff – What difference does it make?

Pierre – None...

A pause.

Pierre *(reluctantly)* – Are Frédérique and Josiane coming together?

Jeff – Josiane took the night train. She should arrive this morning. Frédérique just called me from the airport. That's what woke me up...

Pierre – Is she flying back tonight?

Jeff – I don't know.

Jeff sips his coffee. Pierre, again in front of the fireplace after circling the room, picks up the portrait of the four children.

Pierre – I had forgotten about this photo. How did it end up here...?

Jeff – Mum brought it, I think. The last time she came here with Dad. Just before he went back to the Amazon...

Pierre examines the photo closely with a half-ironic, half-bitter smile.

Pierre – Funny, isn't it? Look. It's a black-and-white photo coloured in by hand. That's what they did in those days. Colour photography must still have been experimental.

Jeff – It doesn't make us any younger...

Pierre – No. I feel like an old film that's been colourised.

This time, Pierre focuses on the subject and not the process.

Pierre – It's strange, looking at this picture again... Everything's there already, isn't it?

Jeff is having a hard time keeping up. He would prefer to enjoy his coffee quietly and wake up gently.

Jeff – Everything...?

Pierre – In this picture! You can already see what each of us would turn into... Frédérique with her fake smile. Josiane with that sarcastic look. You look as if you couldn't care less, and I look like a kicked puppy.

Jeff continues to drink his coffee without responding. Apparently, he is used to his brother's strange reflections and doesn't pay much attention to them.

Pierre – Do you remember when it was taken?

Jeff – No.

Pierre – Neither do I. It's funny, I remember almost nothing about my childhood. And I don't have many photographs of myself as a child to jog my memory.

Jeff – People didn't take so many photographs back then.

Pierre – True. Now we have this infuriating urge to photograph everything. Did you know Jérôme filmed Frédérique giving birth with his camcorder? I wonder how often they watch the tape on a Saturday night... He should have filmed the conception too, and edited the whole thing into a wildlife documentary. I love those programmes. The commentary is always so reassuring, so enlightening. "Isn't nature wonderfully designed?" "The big creatures eat the little ones, but that keeps the numbers down." "The weak must perish, sadly, to preserve the purity of the species."

Pierre looks at the photo again.

Pierre – I'd have liked to know what I looked like as a baby, though. This is one of the oldest pictures I've ever seen of myself. I must have been at least five... *(ironically)* Perhaps Mum and Dad adopted me at that age and never dared tell me. I saw something like that in a television drama once. In that case, you wouldn't really be my brother and sisters...

A pause.

Jeff – I think a photographer came to school.

Pierre – They brought us all together for the photograph. Remember, boys and girls weren't in the same classes then. Even in the playground there was an imaginary border: boys in blue smocks on one side, girls in pink on the other. Crossing the line was strictly forbidden, except to use the toilets, which were on the girls' side. I was in love with a girl I only ever saw on my way to have a pee. I had to pee a lot. But I never spoke to her. I wonder what became of her. I don't even know her name...

A pause.

Jeff – How long has it been since you saw Josiane and Frédérique?

Pierre puts the portrait back.

Pierre – Not since Mum's funeral... It still feels strange to say that. I can't quite believe she's dead... It isn't that I'm especially sad, you understand. But it's odd... being an orphan.

Jeff – Dad isn't dead...

Pierre – We don't know that. We haven't seen him for years. He didn't even come to his own wife's funeral. If cannibals had eaten him, do you think they'd have sent us a death announcement?

Jeff – Are there still cannibals in the Amazon?

Pierre – There are piranhas... Apparently a shoal of piranhas can strip a cow to the bone in five minutes. Imagine what they'd do to Dad... And anyway, he was never really there, was he? Between you and me, his death won't change much. It'll be a formality. Like those couples who marry after thirty years together, just to make it official. When Dad dies, it'll simply make his disappearance official...

A pause.

Pierre – I have a friend who spent fifteen years in psychoanalysis trying to reconnect with his father. Fifteen years! Can you imagine?

Jeff – Did it work?

Pierre – Well... unfortunately, by the end of those fifteen years, his father had died...

Jeff – Don't exaggerate... We're not martyrs either. We had parents at least...

Pierre – Yes, yes, there's always someone worse off than you. Oddly enough, that philosophy has never comforted me much. It's like telling a man who's lost one leg, "Don't complain. You could have lost both."

A pause.

Pierre – Do you know what I learned from Uncle Alberto a few years ago?

Jeff – What?

Pierre – He chose my first name. Mum had just given birth. Dad must have been too busy, as usual. So Uncle Alberto went to register me at the town hall. Apparently he was given a completely free hand over the name. It was only a detail, after all.

Jeff – It was a different time...

Pierre – Even then, some fathers managed to get as far as the town hall to name their children.

Jeff – We've always had a problem with names in this family. Take me! For ten years everyone thought I was called Christophe, until Mum asked for a copy of my birth certificate and discovered Dad hadn't registered me under that name at all.

Pierre – At least he gave you a name. He even gave you his own...

Jeff – I'm not sure that was much of a favour. Jesús isn't an easy name to live with.

Pierre – It's quite common in Spain...

Jeff – Not so common in France. Jesus! And he didn't even have us baptised...

Pierre – Don't complain. There must be Jews called Judas.

Jeff – Oh really?

Pierre – Or Germans called Adolf, if you prefer...

Jeff – Anyway, everyone's always called me Jeff. I don't know why... People assume it's short for Jean-François.

Silence.

Jeff – Are you coming for Christmas?

Pierre *(suddenly aggressive)* – What for? To applaud my brother-in-law's antisemitic and homophobic speeches?

Jeff – He's only trying to provoke you...

Pierre – Listen, with Jérôme defending the ideas of the far-right National Front while claiming to cast blank ballots, and Frédérique voting for the National Front while condemning everything it stands for, the two of them make up one complete far-right voter.

Jeff *(half-heartedly)* – Come on. Their daughter's godfather is Jewish...

Pierre – Ah, the ultimate alibi! "We can't be racist, we have Jewish friends." Lovely people, too. For Jews... They drive Mercedes, just like us. They go skiing in Austria, and they've called their daughter Ingrid. There are idiots among Jews too, you know. Some even support the National Front. Jews, I mean. Stupid Jews. Or Jewish idiots, if you prefer.

Jeff *(amused)* – You're on fine form this morning.

Pierre also allows himself a smile, evidently pleased with his own tirade, and pours another coffee. He likes talking, and likes listening to himself.

Pierre – There are limits, don't you think?

Jeff – Sure, sometimes he could refrain...

Pierre – So why didn't you say anything last time?

Jeff – You didn't say anything either...

Pierre – Yes, but I walked out...

Jeff *(getting up)* – Walking out isn't always the answer...

Jeff heads towards the corridor. Pierre stares after him, stunned, then goes back to La Vie Financière. His mobile phone rings.

Pierre – Hello? *(smiling)* Yes... Yes, fine... No, the roads were pretty clear... No, they're arriving this morning... *(feigning indifference)* So, have you had the lab results...? *(disappointed)* Tonight...? No, I'd rather ring you back... I'm not worried, but when you've never had the test before...

Josiane arrives wheeling a suitcase. She is wearing an extravagant outfit, something like a Mexican poncho.

Pierre *(embarrassed)* – Sorry, I have to go. Josiane's just arrived... Yes, yes, I'll tell them... when the time comes... Me too... Love you. Bye.

Pierre hangs up.

Josiane *(loudly)* – When did you two get here?

Pierre gets up and kisses her without warmth.

Pierre – Last night. Late...

Josiane puts her suitcase down and looks around the room.

Josiane – Oh, this house!

Pierre waits for a comment that doesn't come.

Josiane – It's freezing... I don't understand why our parents never had heating installed...

Pierre – Maybe because we only came in August...

Josiane – Is your brother here?

Pierre – He's your brother too, isn't he? He's in his room...

Josiane – It's true he's not an early riser...

Pierre – Why would you want him to get up early? We only sign this afternoon...

Josiane – So, what are you going to do with all that money?

Pierre – I don't know...

Josiane notices La Vie Financière on the table.

Josiane – Are you reading La Vie Financière now?

Pierre – I've been trading shares... online.

Josiane *(impressed)* – The stock market... Isn't it too risky?

Pierre – It's like sex... If you don't want an unexpected baby, you have to know when to pull out.

Josiane – And does it pay off?

Pierre – Not bad.

Josiane – You'll have to give me advice, then. To invest my inheritance...

Pierre *(ironically)* – It's not difficult. Just use your common sense. In a winter as cold as this one, buy shares in a thermal-underwear company. Just before Mother's Day, sell them and invest in kitchen appliances.

Josiane – Kitchen appliances? Aren't those manufacturers going bust?

Pierre – That's the feminists' fault. Children no longer dare to give their mothers an iron or a food processor for Mother's Day...

Josiane *(confidentially)* – By the way, have you heard?

Pierre – Heard what?

Josiane – About Jesus! He's going bankrupt...

Pierre *(exasperated)* – Can't you call him Jeff, like everyone else? Did he tell you?

Josiane – It's his wife. The poor boy... I don't know what he's going to do now.

Pierre – Why don't you ask him?

Josiane – Ask Catherine?

Pierre – Ask him! Your brother Jeff!

Josiane – He wasn't made to be a boss, it was obvious!

Pierre – Really? How can you tell?

Josiane – Have you seen how late he gets up? Anyway, I didn't sleep a wink on the train. It was packed! And naturally I ended up in a compartment with a whole tribe of Portuguese and their children. One of the children had mumps and howled all night. The rest of the family spent the entire journey eating watermelon and chorizo...

Pierre, who has never got used to his sister's xenophobic outbursts, restrains his anger and resorts to irony.

Pierre – They didn't offer you any?

Josiane – They did! But of course I refused. The whole compartment stank. It made me feel sick...

Pierre – In case you've forgotten, we're of Spanish descent. Your maiden name is Fernandez...

Josiane – My maiden name? I haven't been a maiden for years! Well, I'm going to freshen up. I still feel as if I smell of chorizo.

She goes out. Pierre closes his magazine and heads for the kitchen with the saucepan. Jeff enters, now dressed in a rather stiff, inelegant suit, like the manager of a small business who has made an effort for an important appointment. After a moment Josiane returns, wrapped in a thick jumper, with a copy of the French hunting and classified-advertising magazine Le Chasseur Français under her arm. Jeff and Josiane greet one another with an unenthusiastic kiss.

Jeff *(noticing her magazine, surprised)* – Taking up hunting?

Josiane *(knowingly)* – Hunting for something, yes. It's for the personal ads...

Jeff – The ads?

Josiane – The lonely-hearts ads!

Jeff is both surprised and a bit embarrassed.

Jeff – Any luck?

Josiane – You know what it's like. It's a bit like buying a car.

Jeff – Really?

Josiane – You have to test-drive a few models...

Jeff – And have you found the one you want?

Josiane – Not yet. Unfortunately, at my age I'm limited to second-hand models. And you?

Jeff – What, me?

Josiane – How's your wife?

Jeff – She's fine.

Josiane – And the kids?

Jeff *(coldly)* – You can call them my children. They've got my surname now...

Josiane – Well, it isn't quite the same. Your children are second-hand too, really...

Jeff remains silent, visibly holding back from exploding.

Josiane – And the business?

Jeff – It's fine...

Josiane *(laughing)* – Everything's always fine with you, isn't it?

Jeff *(irritated despite himself)* – I didn't say it was wonderful. I said it was fine...

Josiane – And Pierre?

Jeff – What about Pierre?

Josiane – His work! I saw one of his television serials the other day. My son told me to watch it. What rubbish!

Jeff – It's for young people... Anyway, it pays well.

Josiane – I should have done that, instead of qualifying as a teacher at fifty and trying to teach all those idiots to read...

She goes back to her personal ads. A pause. Pierre returns with hot water. Pierre, Jeff and Josiane help themselves to more coffee.

Josiane *(with a smile)* – Oh, this Nescafé is really dreadful!

The other two, who are already struggling to swallow the stuff, give her a reproachful look. But Josiane presses on.

Josiane – Luckily the jar's nearly empty. It must have been here for years. A huge family jar like that... *(as if doing mental arithmetic)* One spoonful per cup, one month a year, every summer...

Pierre pushes his cup away for good. The door opens and Frédérique enters, wearing an Hermès scarf, gold jewellery and a Vuitton handbag: an unmistakably upper-class look.

Frédérique – Good morning.

Pierre *(without getting up)* – Hi.

Josiane and Jeff get up to kiss their sister.

Jeff – Did you have a good trip?

Pierre – It's barely an hour's flight. Hardly an ordeal...

Frédérique – Always as charming...

Josiane *(holding the Nescafé jar)* – Do you want coffee?

Frédérique – Thank you, I had breakfast on the plane.

Josiane – Wise decision.

Jeff – There's a room left for you. But you might have to change the sheets.

Frédérique – It's not necessary; I'm leaving again tonight...

Josiane – Really? What a shame, travelling all that way for so little...

Pierre – Oh, about two hundred thousand each...

The others look at him with a puzzled expression.

Pierre – Frédérique's here for the sale, like the rest of us, isn't she? She wouldn't travel two thousand kilometres in a day to spend a few hours with her family at the seaside in December...

Frédérique – Because you're not here for that either, are you?

Pierre – Yes... That's exactly what I was saying. We're all here for that.

Josiane – Two hundred thousand francs each... *(having second thoughts, to Jeff)* Are you sure we're getting enough for this place?

Jeff – It's been on the market for a year. Even at that price, buyers haven't exactly been queuing up. If that physiotherapist hadn't rung me last month...

Josiane *(accusingly)* – Maybe we should have done some advertising. I don't know, like placing a few ads...

Jeff – Nobody stopped you. You could have put an ad in Le Chasseur Français, for instance...

Josiane – Yes, but since you were the one taking care of it!

Jeff – Who decided it was my job? I've got other things to do, you know. And I wasn't living here.

Josiane *(not even listening anymore)* – Ah, this house! Well, tonight we'll be rid of it.

Josiane takes another sip of her coffee.

Josiane – It’s even more disgusting cold! *(cheerfully, to the others)* Anyone want some more?

Pierre and Jeff exchange a look of despair.

Jeff – I'll see if I can find some newspapers.

Pierre – I’ll come with you. We can get a decent coffee while we’re out.

Josiane – Bring me Le Nouvel Observateur, will you? It comes out today.

Pierre, surprised, looks at his sister.

Pierre – You read Le Nouvel Observateur now?

Josiane *(knowingly)* – For the personal ads...

Pierre looks at her without understanding but doesn't insist.

Jeff *(to Frédérique)* – Do you want us to bring you something?

Frédérique – I got Madame Figaro on the plane.

Pierre – If the Communist Party has launched a fashion magazine, we’ll bring you that too.

Pierre and Jeff exit.

Frédérique – He's not getting any better.

Josiane – Jeff?

Frédérique – Pierre!

Josiane – Oh, you have to take him as he is. He’s never done anything like other people. Remember? He even learnt to knit when he was little. He made me a scarf...

Frédérique evidently doesn't remember.

Josiane – Don’t you find it odd? We’ve never seen him with a woman...

Frédérique – Perhaps he simply didn’t want to introduce them to us...

As Frédérique seems uninterested, Josiane changes the subject.

Josiane – And how are your children doing?

Frédérique – Fine... Charlotte seems happier at her new school. I hope it works out this time, because it isn’t cheap...

Josiane – Oh, really?

Frédérique – Now, you know, if you're not willing to pay...

Josiane – How much?

Frédérique – 5,000.

Josiane – Per year?

Frédérique – Per month...

Josiane – Five thousand francs a month! That's almost my salary as a secondary-school teacher!

Frédérique – I know, it's expensive, but what can you do? If you want something good, you have to pay the price.

Josiane – University's free.

Frédérique – And end up like everyone else? Everyone goes to university these days. There's no selection any more!

A pause.

Josiane – And Maximilien?

Frédérique – He's doing a three-month work placement through his business school.

Josiane – Oh really? Where?

Frédérique – At McDonald's... *(A pause)* In Miami.

Josiane – In Miami!

Frédérique – Yes, he chose the international section.

Josiane – It must still cost you a fortune!

Frédérique – You could say that. Especially as it's unpaid. With flights and accommodation, it'll cost us about sixty thousand francs. But the school arranges everything. They have an excellent placement network. These days you can't get an internship without connections...

Josiane – But what's he doing there? Is he working in marketing?

Frédérique – No. Sales.

Josiane – In sales...?

Frédérique – He serves customers, actually. In America they believe you should start at the bottom to understand how a business really works.

Josiane *(appalled)* – You mean you're paying sixty thousand francs for your son to serve hamburgers at McDonald's for three months?

Frédérique – In Florida! Those placements are very competitive, you know. They don't take just anyone. And he'll improve his English. That's his weak point...

Silence.

Frédérique – And Bruno, how's he doing?

Josiane – He's studying philosophy at the Sorbonne. He seems to be doing well. He's getting very good marks...

Frédérique – Philosophy nowadays... It leads nowhere, right?

Josiane – At least, it's free...

A pause.

Josiane – He found a girlfriend... I'm glad he's doing well. It hasn't always been easy for him. With my divorce...

Frédérique – Sometimes, a good divorce is better than a bad marriage...

Josiane – Still. No matter what you say, a child needs both their mother and father.

Frédérique – But you and Gérard were always arguing! I came to see you three times in ten years and each time you were having a row. I doubt it was for my benefit. It hardly encouraged me to come back...

A pause.

Frédérique – How could a psychoanalyst be so hopeless at bringing up his own child? You never agreed about anything, especially Bruno's education, and you argued in front of him...

Josiane – Well... You know what Freud said about bringing up children: "Whatever you do, it'll be wrong."

Frédérique – Even so. You always feel somewhat responsible...

Frédérique looks around the room.

Frédérique – It's sad to think we're selling this house. We do have some happy memories here... Funny, isn't it? All year we were crammed into a two-bedroom flat with no bathroom and two exhausted, sulking parents. Then for one month in the summer we had a comfortable house and almost normal parents...

A pause.

Josiane – Miami Playa... What a name for a house that isn't even right on the seafront...

Frédérique – It must have reminded him of Spain... Why has he never gone back, by the way?

Josiane – We'll have to ask him... if we ever see him again. At first, I suppose it was the paperwork. He was afraid he wouldn't be allowed back into France. Later he probably thought Spain was too far away...

Frédérique – Yes... That must be why he settled in Manaus instead... I would have bought this house myself, but Jérôme wasn't keen. And it wasn't the right time...

Josiane – Oh, even at that price, I'm not sure you would have made a good deal...

Silence.

Frédérique – I don't understand why Pierre holds it against me like that. I haven't done anything to him. That also makes me sad. We used to get along well before, didn't we?

Josiane – Before what?

Frédérique *(confused)* – I don't know... Before.

Josiane, no longer listening, also looks around the room.

Josiane – We'll have to do some cleaning before we leave. There's so much dust!

Blackout.

Noon

The four of them come back from outside and take off their coats.

Josiane *(to Jeff)* – Well, thank you for lunch, Jeff... So? What did everyone think of the restaurant?

Frédérique – The setting was quite nice...

Josiane – Wasn't it? Very authentic. And the owner! What a face! Still, the food was good. For the price...

Jeff – Obviously it isn't a gourmet restaurant. There isn't much choice around here.

Josiane – I'm sure that fish hadn't been caught this morning. Imagine serving frozen fish a few kilometres from the sea!

Pierre *(annoyed)* – Next time you can treat us, all right? And you can choose the restaurant.

Josiane – I just hope we don't get food poisoning. With frozen food you never know. Sometimes the cold chain gets broken...

Pierre and Jeff exchange a dismayed look.

Josiane – I'll see if I've got an Alka-Seltzer. I don't feel very well...

Pierre – Sure, go ahead.

Frédérique – I think I have some.

Josiane and Frédérique head towards the bedrooms. A moment.

Pierre – She never gets any easier... They do say the eldest child in every family is the most psychologically fragile...

Jeff – She's always been like that. She won't change now.

Pierre *(thoughtful)* – How old is she anyway?

Jeff doesn't respond.

Pierre – So what are we doing tonight? *(joking)* Going clubbing?

Jeff – I'm a married man. But feel free to go without me.

Pierre – Everything must be shut at this time of year. Remember when we used to spend every evening at nightclubs during the holidays? I thought they were the perfect place to meet women. Everyone was there for the same reason, so statistically it made sense. And yet I never picked anyone up at a nightclub. At the launderette, on the underground, at the dentist's — yes. Never in a nightclub.

A moment.

Pierre – Women probably don't find it romantic enough. For one night with a stranger, perhaps. But not to meet the man of their dreams. Men who go to clubs to pick up women probably don't inspire much confidence. I don't know a single married couple who met in a nightclub. Do you?

Jeff – Yes... Catherine and I met in a nightclub.

Pierre *(caught off guard)* – Right. I think I'll have a nap...

Jeff – You always have to generalise. That's your problem. Your life isn't a statistic. Statistics are other people's lives.

Pierre *(impressed)* – Do you realise how profound that was?

Jeff *(irritated)* – No, of course I don't. Whenever I say something sensible, it's an accident. I certainly don't mean to. Thank goodness you're here to point it out.

Pierre – I'm sorry...

Jeff – That's your other problem, Pierre. You're far too quick to treat people as idiots.

Jeff gets up to find a magazine. Pierre does the same. Josiane and Frédérique return, each carrying something to read.

Jeff *(to Josiane)* – Feeling better?

Josiane – I threw everything up.

Pierre *(dismayed)* – So that's an improvement...

Josiane – Not really. I still feel like that slice of tuna is weighing on my stomach...

Frédérique – Perhaps it's an allergy. Allergies to fresh tuna are quite common.

Pierre – That must be it. The fish was too fresh.

Jeff is reading Le Point, Pierre La Vie Financière, Frédérique Madame Figaro. Josiane finishes Le Chasseur Français and moves on to Le Nouvel Observateur. Pierre looks up and is surprised by his sister's choice of reading material.

Pierre – Are you looking for a husband?

Josiane *(laughing)* – At my age, I'm not sure I'll find one...

Pierre *(ironically)* – Between a hunting magazine and a left-wing weekly, you're casting the net pretty wide. You should put yourself on the internet as well. Then you'd cover the whole planet.

Genuinely interested, Josiane looks up from her newspaper.

Josiane – Do you think so...?

Pierre can't believe his sister takes him seriously.

Pierre – Yes. Put up a photograph and a catchy message. You could even touch up the picture a bit. Digital photography can work miracles these days...

Josiane – Perhaps you're right. I should get into this multimedia business. Though I'm not sure I could manage it. Do you know how it works?

Before Pierre can respond, a mobile phone rings. Josiane rushes to answer hers.

Josiane *(coquettishly)* – That'll be mine... I bought myself a mobile for Christmas. *(laughing)* Got to keep up with the times!

She answers clumsily. Clearly she is not used to the device.

Josiane *(irritated, stabbing at the buttons)* – Oh, damn it, how does this thing work...?

Pierre watches her, impressed.

Josiane *(with exaggerated politeness, shouting)* – Hello? Yes... Yes, speaking... Hello... Yes... Yes, in my fifties...

She realises the others can't help but overhear her.

Josiane – Well, nearer fifty than sixty... Yes, I happened to see your advert in Le Chasseur Français, and... No, I don't hunt. I must have picked it up at the hairdresser's... Divorced, yes... And you...? *(freezing)* Oh... What did she die of...? *(laughing)* If you don't mind my asking, of course... Oh dear... She must have suffered terribly... Personally, I think in cases like that they ought to put them down...

The others look at her in disbelief.

Josiane – Yes, it must have left a terrible gap in your life... No, I don't have any pets. Just a son... *(laughing)* They make a mess as well, you know! Do you like children...? No, I think we're rather past that, aren't we? At our age, the baby probably wouldn't turn out quite normal...

Josiane goes towards the bedrooms for some privacy. They can no longer hear her conversation.

Pierre – Poor child. Imagine being ten and having a mother who's nearly seventy!

Frédérique *(indignant)* – Spoken like a man. Men have no qualms about leaving their wives at fifty to go and repopulate the planet.

Pierre *(half serious, half provocative)* – It isn't quite the same for men...

Frédérique *(heatedly)* – Why not? Women live longer than men, remember. It would make sense for us to be able to have children later in life.

Pierre – The difference is that fifty-year-old men generally have children with younger women. It evens things out. Josiane seems more interested in the senior citizens, doesn't she?

Frédérique – How would you know?

Jeff, embarrassed, tries in vain to convey to Pierre that it would be better to change the subject.

Pierre – I doubt many twenty-year-old men advertise in Le Chasseur Français...

Frédérique seems more affected than necessary by this conversation, which appears to touch her personally.

Frédérique – You're all the same!

Frédérique storms off.

Pierre *(surprised)* – I didn't know she was such a feminist! What's got into her? I don't care if Josiane wants to go out with younger men.

Jeff – I think the problem is fifty-year-old men cheating on their wives with younger women. Best not to bring it up...

Pierre, astonished, tries to understand. Josiane and Frédérique return.

Josiane – What time is our appointment?

Jeff – The estate agent said three o'clock.

Josiane *(thoughtfully)* – Eight hundred thousand francs... It doesn't seem much in the end. Especially divided by four...

Pierre – Don't worry. One of us could still die before the afternoon's out.

Josiane *(holding her head)* – It may well be me. I feel dreadful. *(trying to laugh)* You haven't poisoned me, have you?

Josiane stops in front of the portrait of the four children on the mantelpiece.

Josiane – What are we going to do with this photograph?

The others look at her without understanding.

Josiane – We can't leave it here when the house is sold. Who will take it?

Frédérique – We could have another print made...

Josiane – The negative has probably disappeared a long time ago...

Pierre *(ironically)* – We could cut it into four. Each of us takes our own face. *(to Josiane)* You can scan yours and put it on your website to attract a few perverts...

Josiane *(examining the picture, missing the irony)* – What a shame that would be. It's such a lovely photograph.

Pierre – Quite right. It looks wonderful on a mantelpiece.

Josiane – Let's draw lots for it. There's a box of matches here.

The others are shocked, but not quite enough to object. Josiane has already taken the box of matches from beside the photograph. She selects four, breaks the heads off three and turns round, holding the four matches in her closed fist.

Josiane *(excitedly)* – Whoever gets the red tip wins. Jeff, you go first.

Jeff obeys reluctantly. He pulls a match without a red tip.

Josiane – Your turn, Frédérique!

Frédérique obliges, torn between wanting to win and a vague sense of embarrassment. Pierre watches in dismay. Frédérique also draws a headless match. Her fleeting disappointment is quickly masked by a strained smile.

Josiane *(more and more excited)* – Now, Pierre, it's between you and me.

Pierre gets up casually.

Pierre – Isn't there a story like this in the Bible? Some rogues casting lots for the Holy Shroud?

Frédérique *(ironic)* – I didn't know you read the Bible...

Pierre *(dryly)* – It's called general knowledge.

Pierre draws the match with the red head. Josiane looks childishly disappointed: she is a bad loser.

Josiane – Oh, blast! I never win anything!

Pierre takes out a cigarette and ostentatiously lights it with his winning match. He takes a satisfied puff. Josiane watches him.

Josiane – You smoke now?

Pierre – Yes... For about twenty years. Hadn't you noticed?

Josiane – I read the other day that every cigarette takes ten minutes off your life.

After a pause, to Pierre.

Josiane – How many do you smoke a day?

Pierre – By my calculations I should have died six months ago. I can't understand it.

Josiane – And you, Frédérique? You don't smoke?

Frédérique – Occasionally. Low-tar cigarettes.

Pierre – If Frédérique smoked cannabis, even her joints would be low-tar.

Josiane – They're just as bad for you as ordinary ones, you know. Perhaps worse.

Pierre – I can't remember who compared life to a bottle of strong drink. We're all given one at birth. Some people take a tiny sip every day to help their digestion. Others down the lot in one go and get gloriously drunk.

Frédérique *(ironically)* – Wasn't that La Fontaine? The Grasshopper and the Ant?

Pierre – Great themes are universal... And of course you can be a grasshopper one day and an ant the next. You dressed like a hippie in the seventies, remember? You had a long-haired boyfriend who played guitar. What was his name? Paul! He was a primary-school teacher. You might even have been a bit left-wing then. Perhaps you smoked joints without filters...

Frédérique – All joints have filters.

Pierre – Just checking you remembered... Paul sang his way through a few summers, and the following winter you married the anaesthetist.

Frédérique – His name is Jérôme.

Pierre – Carpentier, yes. Frédérique Carpentier certainly sounds better than Frédérique Fernandez...

Frédérique – Did you want me to keep my maiden name? I don't claim my Spanish origins, if that's what you mean.

Pierre – Still, you could have told your children they were distant cousins of their Portuguese cleaner. They seem to think cleaners are another species.

Frédérique – You're delusional!

Pierre *(laughing)* – Do you realise what you escaped? Dad called Jeff Jesus. He could have called you Mercedes. Imagine having the same name as your husband's car.

Josiane looks worse and worse, but in the heat of the argument, no one really pays attention to her.

Josiane – Oh dear, the room's spinning... My head feels like a watermelon...

Pierre – Yes, you've changed since the seventies! I remember De Gaulle's referendum in 1969. You had a blazing row with Dad because he was voting yes. You called it a plebiscite. You must have learnt the word at school the day before, but I was impressed. You dared call De Gaulle a dictator to his face. I admired you for it...

Frédérique – You can't be a teenager for ever. And it's not as though you've become some great rebel. Back then you read Rock & Folk. Now it's La Vie Financière...

Pierre – But I don't vote for the National Front...

Frédérique – Oh, come on! I voted for them once! It was a protest vote...

Pierre – You could have protested by voting for the Revolutionary Communist League, or a party that believed in levitation. Why the National Front, of all people, if you disagree with everything they stand for?

Frédérique – I don't have to justify myself.

Jeff *(trying to calm things down)* – Well, we should get going...

Pierre *(checking his watch)* – It's in an hour!

Jeff – If it's going to be spent arguing...

Josiane *(weakly)* – He's right. For once we're all together, couldn't you make an effort, Pierre?

Pierre – No! I'm tired of making an effort. And spare me that "all together" nonsense! What brings us together? We've come to collect our cheques. In an hour we'll each go our separate ways and probably never see one another again. Let's stop pretending!

Jeff – There's no point in arguing.

Pierre – Jeff, you're a nice man. But open your eyes! Do you know what your beloved sisters say about you behind your back? That you're nice, all right, but that you ran Dad's company into the ground because you can't get out of bed in the morning.

Jeff freezes.

Frédérique *(getting up)* – I never said that!

Pierre – True. You're just like a politician: you haven't even the courage of your convictions. At least Josiane has the nerve to say what she thinks.

Josiane *(fanning herself with Le Chasseur Français)* – Maybe I should go get some fresh air...

Frédérique – Wait, who are you to give lessons to everyone...?

Pierre – I may not be much, but I didn't acquire what little I have simply by saying "I do" at the town hall.

Frédérique *(shaken)* – What exactly do you mean?

Pierre – You think you're better than us because you've got a manicured lawn, rustic fireplace and exposed beams. Apart from the fact that I find your nouveau-riche existence pathetic, what did you do to deserve it? Marry an anaesthetist and produce two badly brought-up children! Life isn't one long general anaesthetic...

Frédérique *(stepping forward to confront him)* – And what have you done that's so extraordinary? You think you're a novelist because you translated three trashy romances, and a screenwriter because you knocked out a few idiotic sitcoms.

Pierre – Your children watch those idiotic sitcoms. And you'd read those trashy romances too if you weren't ashamed to buy them. In fact you don't need to: your whole life is a romance novel. Have you noticed how those stories end when the young nurse marries the rich doctor? Nothing about the thrilling life of the doctor's wife. Unless it's Madame Bovary...

Frédérique – As for you, I can't see you getting married any time soon. You've always been selfish. What woman would put up with you? You'll end up an old bachelor...

Pierre – Better an old bachelor than an old fool.

Frédérique – You can be both...

Josiane seems ready to faint, but no one notices.

Josiane – I hope I'm not going to pass out... My ears are buzzing...

Pierre – What I can't stand isn't that your standard of living is out of all proportion to your IQ. It's that you still manage to believe the minimum wage paid to the immigrants who collect your rubbish is cutting into your holiday budget. Your Club Med holidays, with an occasional organised excursion to observe the customs of the natives, without ever getting out of your four-wheel drive...

Pierre and Frédérique glare at each other. Suddenly Josiane collapses. The other three finally notice her and rush to help.

Frédérique – Josiane? Are you okay?

Frédérique slaps her sister's cheeks, harder and harder, trying to bring her round. Josiane responds, but remains barely conscious.

Pierre – Perhaps we'd better get her to hospital.

Blackout.

Afternoon

The four return. Frédérique supports Josiane by the arm.

Josiane – Oh, I'm fine now, you know.

Jeff – Maybe you should lie down for a bit, no...?

Josiane – We have to get back to the notary's office. We're probably late already. And you need my signature.

Jeff – I rang the estate agent to postpone the appointment. Go and lie down.

Josiane – Well...

Josiane heads towards the bedroom, accompanied by Frédérique.

Pierre – Do you think our argument earlier made her ill? I didn't know she was so sensitive...

Jeff – I don't understand. I ate the tuna too and I'm fine... Maybe Frédérique's right. It could be an allergy.

Pierre – If she were allergic to tuna, surely she'd have noticed by her age. It can't be the first tuna she's ever eaten. If we were talking about panda steak in eucalyptus oil, perhaps. But tuna with Provençal sauce...?

Jeff – What did the doctor say?

Pierre – I don't know. Frédérique was with her.

Frédérique returns.

Jeff – So? Is it an allergy?

Frédérique – No...

Pierre – Food poisoning?

Frédérique – It has nothing to do with what she ate...

The other two are starting to get a little intrigued.

Jeff – I suspected as much...

Pierre *(sarcastically)* – So what is it? Early menopause?

Frédérique – Josiane's got mumps. The doctor's given her antibiotics...

Jeff *(surprised)* – Mumps? Isn't that a childhood illness?

Pierre *(joking)* – So? With her mental age...

Faced with the disapproving looks of the other two, Pierre tries to lighten the mood.

Pierre – Okay, okay... It's not the end of the world.

Frédérique – No, but Jérôme says childhood diseases can cause complications if you catch them as an adult.

Jeff – What kind of complications?

Frédérique – In pregnant women, rubella can cause birth defects.

Pierre *(laughing)* – If that's all... In Josiane's case...

Frédérique *(maliciously)* – Mumps can cause infections of the testicles and sometimes permanent sterility.

Pierre freezes and digests this information. Silence.

Pierre *(to Jeff, trying to sound casual)* – Did you have mumps as a child?

Jeff – Yes... Didn't you?

Pierre – I don't know...

Josiane comes back. Pierre instinctively steps away from her.

Josiane – I couldn't sleep, so...

Jeff – There's no rush. I said we'd be there around five.

Josiane's mobile rings. She answers in the same excessively friendly, excessively loud manner as before.

Josiane – Hello? Yes... Yes, speaking... Hello... *(in a more natural voice)* Oh, sorry, Pascal. I didn't recognise your voice. How are you...? *(horrified)* Your wife...? A car accident... Oh, no! I'm so sorry... I see... Poor thing... How old was she...? That's not much... And she really is dead...? Well, if that's what they told you... Listen, the insurance should pay out... at book value... How many kilometres had she done? Quite a few, then... And your wife, is she all right? Well, that's the main thing! It wasn't her fault, was it...? Oh, if you can't even stop on the hard shoulder to answer your phone... What do they expect people to do? Friday? Yes... Fine, Pascal. Bye.

She hangs up.

Josiane – That was my dentist.

The others stare at her in astonishment. Josiane realises she needs to explain.

Josiane – Well, I call him my dentist because he is a dentist. We do amateur theatre together...

A moment of shock.

Jeff – You do theatre with your dentist?

Josiane – Yes. He's directing The Learned Ladies, by Molière.

Frédérique – Your dentist is mounting The Learned Ladies...?

Josiane – That's right.

Pierre – A dentist doing theatre... I thought that was genetically impossible. He must be a mutant.

Frédérique – Are you sure he's a dentist?

Pierre – It's hardly the kind of thing a man would claim just to show off. And if he only mounts learned ladies, you've got nothing to worry about...

Josiane – It's my front teeth I'm worried about. He's cemented them in, but I don't know how long they'll last... What can you do? We've all got rotten teeth in this family.

Pierre – One more defect we inherited from Mum and Dad.

Frédérique – With your inheritance you can afford implants. Like mine...

Josiane – Breast implants?

Frédérique – Dental implants!

Josiane – Ah... Though I don't know whether it's worth bothering at my age. Once you're sixty, everything becomes a temporary repair. It's like getting a car fixed. You think, "If this part lasts another few years, something else will probably give way first..."

Pierre – I never knew you were so passionate about cars...

Jeff *(looking at his watch)* – Well, we really have to go now. Josiane, are you sure you're okay?

Josiane *(rising energetically)* – Of course! I'm not dead yet, you know! Not before I've collected my inheritance...

Jeff – Have you got Mum and Dad's family record book? The notary wanted a copy...

Josiane rummages in her bag, produces the document and holds it up.

Josiane – Here it is!

Pierre *(intrigued)* – Can I see it?

Josiane seems to hesitate.

Josiane – Why...?

The others look at her, intrigued by her reluctance.

Pierre – I don't know. I've never seen it... I'm not even sure I know my paternal grandmother's third given name...

Josiane hands over the family record book. Pierre leafs through it while the others prepare to leave.

Pierre – I bet you don't know what time I was born, either. You can't even remember my birthday...

The others ignore Pierre's irony. He continues to flip through the family record book, and his smile fades.

Pierre *(reading)* – Fifth child...

Pierre, no longer joking, turns to the others, who are also frozen.

Pierre – Did you know there were five of us?

Josiane *(after a moment)* – Well... Yes...

Frédérique – I think so... I wasn't sure...

Jeff, not really moved, searches his pockets.

Jeff – Where did I put my keys again...

Pierre – Is that all you've got to say? You've just discovered we had a little sister who died...

Jeff stops searching for his keys, realising the gravity of this information. Frédérique leans over the family record book over Pierre's shoulder.

Frédérique – Émilie. Died on... She was just fifteen days old...

Pierre – Fifteen days is a long time... Long enough to grow attached... *(to Josiane)* So you knew? Why didn't you tell us?

Josiane – Mum never spoke about her... What difference would it have made?

Blackout.

Evening

The four siblings enter the room, coming from outside. They remove their coats in silence. Pierre and Frédérique sit down.

Josiane *(with forced cheerfulness)* – Well, this calls for a celebration, doesn't it?

The others look at her. The atmosphere is heavy: they are torn between the satisfaction of having settled an important matter and the sense that a chapter of their lives has closed. Josiane, apparently oblivious, rummages in a cupboard.

Josiane – I'm sure I saw a bottle of sparkling wine somewhere. We're not leaving it for the buyer. Might be a bit warm, but never mind...

She takes the bottle from the cupboard, along with four glasses.

Frédérique *(reluctantly)* – I think I'll pass. Sparkling wine doesn't agree with me...

Josiane *(opening the bottle)* – Come on, you'll toast with us!

Josiane pours her a glass without waiting. Frédérique lets it happen. Josiane hands out the glasses.

Pierre *(ironically)* – What are we drinking to?

Jeff *(without joy)* – To the sale.

Josiane – To our cheques!

They clink glasses.

Josiane – That physiotherapist was rather handsome... *(to Jeff)* Is he married?

Jeff – I don't think so...

Frédérique – Didn't he seem a bit effeminate?

Josiane – I wouldn't have minded a few massages from him... Except it would be a shame to give him mumps. Apparently, in men, it can... Can't it, Frédérique?

Pierre *(annoyed)* – Okay, that's enough...

Frédérique – He was very young, though. Odd to buy a country house at that age... *(emotionally)* It feels strange knowing the house is sold. That we'll never come back...

Jeff – Yes. The summers were nice...

Pierre – We hadn't been coming here much already...

Frédérique – In any case, it's been a long time since we came here together...

Josiane – Fourteen years.

The others look at her, surprised.

Josiane *(with a fixed smile)* – Fourteen years since the four of us were last here together.

The others are surprised by her precision. It reveals a sensitivity Josiane usually keeps hidden.

Josiane – We celebrated Bruno's birthday here. He still talks about it when we look at the photographs. We gave him a lovely party... A year before my divorce... I'd have liked to see more of you around then, too.

The others fall silent, uncomfortable, even though Josiane maintains her smile.

Josiane – Are you leaving tonight, Frédérique?

Frédérique – Yes, that was the plan... Though I don't have to. My return ticket's flexible...

Jeff – Stay with us until tomorrow. We can drop you at the airport on the way.

Pierre *(ironically)* – If you're in a hurry, don't let us stop you. We all know how busy you are...

Jeff *(authoritatively)* – Pierre...

Pierre gestures to indicate that he concedes.

Frédérique – All right, then. I'll stay.

Josiane – There! We can spend the evening together. As a family...

Silence.

Pierre – Shall we eat out? I'm feeling generous today. My treat. Out of my cheque...

Frédérique – What generosity...

Pierre makes an effort not to respond to the provocation.

Pierre – Not at the place where we had lunch, anyway... It was dreadful. Who'd open a restaurant in a place like that?

Josiane – It would be nicer to eat here, wouldn't it? One last time.

Jeff – What are we eating?

Josiane – We'll find something. We can clear out the cupboards.

Jeff searches the cupboard and takes out what he finds.

Jeff *(like a waiter in an expensive restaurant)* – Ten-year-old spaghetti, accompanied by a delicate sauce from a tin approaching its best-before date.

Josiane – We're all getting past our best-before dates, too...

Frédérique disappears into the kitchen with the provisions. Josiane follows her. Pierre and Jeff are left alone. A moment.

Pierre – I know about the company... What are you going to do?

Jeff – I don't know. There's still a lot to sort out.

Silence.

Jeff – So is that what you think too? That I ruined the company because I wasn't up to the job?

Pierre – That business could only survive with someone willing to give it fifteen hours a day, like Dad. But he belonged to another era. You weren't prepared to do that, and I don't blame you. None of us would have.

Jeff – I should never have agreed to take it over.

Pierre – Somebody had to be the scapegoat...

A moment.

Jeff – I might open a restaurant...

Pierre – A restaurant? You can't even cook spaghetti!

Jeff – Not a gourmet restaurant. A pizzeria. You don't need to be a chef to make pizzas. And I'd employ people, obviously.

Pierre *(worried)* – Have you already got somewhere in mind?

Jeff – Yes... The restaurant where we had lunch. The owner wants to sell it. That's why I took you there. I wanted to know what you thought.

Pierre, embarrassed, doesn't respond.

Jeff – Well?

Pierre – Why here?

Jeff – Why not? Catherine and I have had enough of the Paris suburbs. It'll be good for the children, too. There's a flat above the restaurant. We'd have some fresh country air. Now the firm's closing, I need a new direction. What do you think?

Pierre *(awkwardly)* – Well... It isn't a very good location, is it?

Jeff – It's next to the railway station.

Pierre – There are only two trains a day.

Jeff – It has a terrace.

Pierre – Wedged between the railway and the road. Not quite my idea of the countryside. And you can only use the terrace in good weather. Summer's all right here, but it can't be very busy the rest of the year. We weren't exactly fighting for tables at lunchtime. Why do you think the owner wants to sell?

Jeff *(disappointed)* – With that attitude we'd never do anything. We'll have to attract customers and keep them coming back, of course. But there isn't another pizzeria for miles. I'm sure it could work. Just because we're by the sea doesn't mean people want fish every day.

Pierre – They don’t want pizza every day either.

A moment.

Pierre – Have you already committed yourself to this restaurant?

Jeff – Yes... I’ve signed a preliminary agreement. I found out it was for sale when I came down to deal with this house. We had to move quickly. Catherine and I decided...

Pierre – Then what do you expect me to say? If you wanted my opinion, why didn’t you ask me beforehand?

Jeff *(losing his temper)* – Because I knew you’d criticise it! You always know everything, don’t you? Everything works out for you.

Pierre *(sighing)* – Don’t start. I haven’t written anything in over a year. Or at least I haven’t sold anything. I just don’t make a habit of complaining. Believe me, I’ve had plenty of failures. And not only at work...

Pierre can see that his brother is offended.

Pierre – Sorry, Jeff. You asked what I thought and I told you. I’m not an expert on restaurants. I could be wrong. In fact I’d love to be wrong...

The tension eases.

Pierre – So you agree with Frédérique? You think I’m selfish and arrogant?

Jeff – I think you could try being a little more forgiving... Try to understand other people...

Pierre – I know. I shouldn’t have spoken to Frédérique like that earlier.

Jeff – You’ve always been the family’s thorn in the side. But you’re right about one thing: it’s no good always accepting everything without a word.

Pierre – I just wish we’d stayed closer. Been there for one another a bit more.

Jeff – We were never especially close, you know. Your memory’s playing tricks. We played some vicious pranks on one another as children. Once you chased us round the garden with a hammer. I’ve never been so frightened. Whenever I hear that song about having a hammer, I think of you...

Pierre looks at him without understanding.

Jeff *(singing)* – If I had a hammer...

Pierre *(singing along)* – I’d hammer Mum and Dad, my brothers and sisters... Oh, what a happy life!

Jeff – I’ve always wanted to ask you: if you’d caught me that day, would you really have smashed my skull in?

Pierre – I don't think so. But I was delighted to have terrified you. I was the youngest. For once somebody was frightened of me, and it was intoxicating. Afterwards Frédérique said I was mad. She sounded so certain that for years I wondered if she was right. Sometimes I still do... You're right. The four of us never got on very well. It's the myth of the good old days. Nothing's really changed...

Jeff – What's changed is that we had to put up with one another back then. Once the house is sold, we won't have to. That's when we'll really have to try to get along. If we want our children to have aunts and uncles.

Pierre – Our children... What do we have left in common?

Jeff – Nothing. Nothing that can't be divided by four.

Pierre – Do you regret selling the house?

Jeff – Anyway, it's too late.

Pierre – It was already too late before we signed, wasn't it? I couldn't imagine spending my summer holidays here with Jérôme, listening to him moan about the French health-insurance deficit and the taxes crippling private practitioners. Funny he never made the connection. Perhaps the health system's in deficit because doctors like him earn too much...

Suddenly the lights go out.

Jeff – Damn. A power cut.

Pierre – There are matches on the mantelpiece.

Jeff – What we need is water...

Pierre – What?

Jeff – Pass me that bottle of water.

Pierre passes him the bottle, puzzled. Jeff pours water into the carbide lamp on the mantelpiece, strikes a match and lights it. A faint glow illuminates the room.

Pierre – What is this?

Jeff – Don't you remember?

Pierre – No...

Jeff – It rained all day, which was unusual in August. Dad decided to take us out looking for snails. He dragged us round all the hardware shops in the area to find this contraption.

Pierre – Oh yes, the carbide lamp...

Jeff – Even though we had two or three torches at home. Why he needed a carbide lamp to go hunting snails I'll never know. Perhaps it reminded him of his childhood.

Pierre – How does it work?

Jeff – Carbide's a kind of coal. Water drips onto it and produces a flammable gas.

Pierre – I didn't remember that.

Jeff – In the end you didn't come. Dad woke us at four in the morning, but you couldn't get out of bed that day...

A moment.

Jeff – It was just Dad and me. It was funny. He spoke in a whisper, as though the snails might hear us and run away. We brought home a whole bucketful... Next morning the house was full of snails. We'd forgotten to put a lid on the bucket. A snail can get a surprisingly long way in one night...

A moment.

Jeff – I think Dad was disappointed you didn't come with us...

The lights come back on.

Pierre – That didn't last long.

Jeff puts out the lamp. Silence. Embarrassed, Pierre changes the subject.

Pierre – And how are Catherine and the children?

Jeff – Catherine's doing a course in basic bookkeeping. She'll be able to look after the restaurant accounts. I don't think I'm cut out for that...

Pierre – And the children? It's ages since I saw them...

Jeff – They're doing well.

Pierre – Funny, I'm not saying it to flatter you, but I've never seen such well-behaved children.

Jeff – You don't see them very often...

Pierre *(smiling)* – You're right. We ought to be able to choose our children. And children ought to be able to choose their parents...

Jeff *(amused)* – You realise that's a pretty stupid thing to say?

Pierre – I know. That's because I don't have any. The idea frightens me, actually. Especially having a son. What if he were like me...? I'm not sure I'd know how to explain to him why life is worth living. I'm like Dad, in the end. I wouldn't know how to tell my son...

Jeff – It might be a girl...

Pierre gets up, troubled.

Pierre – Sorry. I have to make a phone call.

Pierre takes out his mobile and starts to go. As Jeff heads towards the bedrooms, Pierre stays in the living room.

Pierre – It's me... Yes, I know, but it wasn't the right moment to tell them. I've had another row with my sister... Oh, the usual, except this time I told her everything I'd been keeping bottled up. I shouldn't have, but it was a relief... *(adopting a falsely casual tone)* So, did you ring the lab...? Negative! *(sighing with relief)* Thank goodness... That's a weight off my mind. I admit I was worried. Even when you take no risks, statistically, a fifty-year-old bachelor like me... Even after the monastic life I led before I met you... *(suddenly anxious)* By the way, when you get home, could you look in my medical record, in the bottom drawer of my desk, and see whether I had mumps as a child?

Jeff returns and sits down. Embarrassed, Pierre moves towards the bedrooms to finish his call. Frédérique enters from the kitchen, carrying a sponge.

Pierre *(moving away)* – No, I'll explain... Of course it isn't urgent, but...

Pierre disappears towards the bedrooms. Frédérique wipes the table, eyeing Jeff, who sits there impassively while she works.

Frédérique *(joking)* – Comfortable, are we?

Jeff *(preoccupied)* – I'm fine.

A moment.

Jeff *(choosing his words)* – Don't be too hard on Pierre, you know...

Frédérique *(hurt)* – This time he went too far. Nobody has ever spoken to me like that. Do you expect me just to take what he said earlier?

Jeff – He's had to put up with a lot without saying anything, too... And frankly, he isn't the only one...

Frédérique looks at him, a little surprised.

Jeff – Listen, Frédérique, I didn't appreciate Jérôme's performance at Mum's funeral either, with all those vulgar jokes. It should have been a chance for us to be together, as a family. It wasn't a hunting-club dinner, and it wasn't even his mother we were burying. You should have reminded him of that... *(a pause, with suppressed anger)* He should have known his place. Next time he'd better remember it, or I'll punch him in the face.

Frédérique is taken aback by this uncharacteristic show of authority from Jeff.

Frédérique *(shaken)* – I'm sorry... I know he was dreadful. I told him afterwards, I swear...

Jeff – Afterwards was too late...

Frédérique – Anyway, it won't happen again...

Jeff – No, Frédérique. You don't bury your parents twice... *(getting up)* There are occasions you can't afford to miss. The four of us have missed far too many...

Frédérique *(trying again)* – But don't you think Pierre could be a little more tolerant too?

Jeff – For once, I'll make the joke. There are places where anything goes. They're called brothels. But I'm not having a free-for-all at my house this Christmas.

Frédérique – All right...

Jeff – I'll put a tablecloth on.

Pierre returns from the bedroom. Josiane enters with a camera.

Josiane – Why don't we take one last photograph of the four of us here? I've got a self-timer!

The others look embarrassed, but Josiane has already set the timer and put the camera on the table. The four stand in front of the fireplace, in the same positions and with the same stiff expressions as in the old school portrait. The flash goes off. They separate, and Josiane puts the camera away.

Josiane – I'll have four copies printed and framed. That'll be your Christmas present!

A moment.

Josiane – Right, I'll get the spaghetti cooking.

Jeff and Frédérique also get up.

Jeff – I'll open the tin.

Frédérique – I'm setting the table.

Pierre *(joking)* – I really can't think what I could do...

Frédérique – You could help me lay the table...

Jeff and Josiane disappear into the kitchen. Frédérique and Pierre lay the table in silence, then sit down. Pierre seems unusually cheerful. He whistles.

Frédérique – You seem remarkably happy all of a sudden. Is it the sale of the house, or the thought of never seeing us again?

Pierre – I haven't had the call about mumps yet, but I've just found out I'm HIV-negative...

Frédérique is a bit surprised.

Pierre – I've met someone. We both had the test...

Frédérique *(coldly)* – Congratulations... Though be careful. Living as a couple is the first step towards becoming bourgeois. Isn't that what you used to say?

Pierre – All right, I'm sorry about earlier. But I had to get it off my chest. Must be a midlife crisis. *(a pause)* You know, I haven't become what I dreamt of being either.

Frédérique – At least you tried...

Pierre – Yes, I tried. But I didn't succeed. Perhaps I should have kept making the same mistakes... Do you know what I really hold against you?

Frédérique – Oh, hasn't it finished yet?

Pierre – Not knowing where to draw the line. Thirty years ago we agreed on one thing: we didn't want to live like our parents. But I think you went wrong by trying to do exactly the opposite.

Holding back tears, Frédérique looks at the fireplace.

Frédérique – I'm cold.

Pierre – Too bad there's no wood...

Frédérique – It's never been used. It would be a shame to dirty it now...

Awkward silence.

Pierre – Did you know the company was being wound up?

Frédérique – What company?

Pierre – Dad's company! Well, Jeff's...

Frédérique – No...

Pierre – Josiane told me this morning. You'd have found out anyway.

Frédérique – I suspected it would end like this.

Pierre – It's probably for the best, in the end.

Frédérique – He was never really cut out for business...

Pierre – Especially family business.

Frédérique – With the money from the house, maybe he can start something of his own...

Pierre – Yes...

Silence.

Frédérique – Jérôme and I are getting divorced...

Pierre *(taken aback)* – Oh really...? Why...?

Frédérique – His assistant's called Frédérique too. Let's just say he gets us confused. At the clinic he mistakes her for his wife, only younger. And at home he mistakes me for the maid...

Pierre *(at a loss for words)* – I'm sorry...

Frédérique *(amused)* – Don't tell me you're heartbroken at the thought of never seeing Jérôme again...

Pierre *(relaxing)* – Heartbroken? No, that would be going too far...

Frédérique – I think it's for the best, too. The children are grown up. Perhaps I can finally have a life of my own.

Pierre – A life of your own! Careful, it isn't always easy. Take it from a soon-to-be former confirmed bachelor!

Frédérique – Living together isn't always a bed of roses either. Take it from a housewife who's about to become an ex-housewife... Still, I don't want to put you off. I just hope you won't leave your wife for someone younger in ten years' time.

Pierre *(amused)* – My wife...? Well, in ten years I'll be nearly sixty. And no danger of that. I've skipped a stage. I'm starting straight away with someone younger...

Frédérique *(curious)* – How old?

Pierre – Twenty-eight...

Frédérique – You practically take them from the cradle...

Pierre – They're always the same age. I'm the one who keeps getting older...

Frédérique – I'll come to your wedding all the same. If you invite me...

Pierre – Marriage is a long way off. But perhaps you can come to my civil partnership ceremony...

A pause. They look at one another. Deeply moved, Frédérique thinks she understands.

Pierre – You're the first person in the family I've told...

Frédérique *(deeply moved)* – Why me?

Pierre – I suppose I don't hate you quite as much as I pretend. And I remember you told me about your engagement before anyone else. Or rather, you told me Jérôme had proposed and asked for my blessing before you said yes. I knew it was only a game, but I was touched that you trusted me. Like an idiot, I told you to marry him! If only I'd known... He was much nicer then.

Frédérique – Yes...

Pierre – He had long hair... Well, he had hair. Amazing how things deteriorate. At first, I thought you two were the picture of the perfect family.

Frédérique – I'm not sure such a thing as the perfect family exists...

Josiane comes back with a dish of spaghetti. Jeff follows her with a few pieces of wood in his hands.

Jeff – There was an old chair in the kitchen, riddled with woodworm. We can have a little fire.

Pierre – There are some old Harlequin romances over there to use as kindling.

Josiane – Why don't we burn all the furniture? It isn't worth anything. It would save us having to move it!

Jeff lights the fire. All four gaze thoughtfully into the flames.

Pierre – This reminds me of a picture in my primary-school history book. I don't know why it stayed with me. It showed Bernard Palissy, a Renaissance potter, breaking up his own furniture to keep his kiln burning and fire his glazes. It was presented as heroic: the penniless artist sacrificing everything for his work. Funny. I remember so little about my childhood. Why should I remember that?

Frédérique – It reminds me of a chant we used to sing at school: "Burn the books, and the teacher too!" It was the first revolutionary slogan I learnt in kindergarten. I thought that was really how we'd finish our first year of school. But no... We just went home and were bored stiff all summer.

Pierre – What about you, Josiane? Does this remind you of anything?

Josiane *(watching the books burn)* – I had a French teacher at secondary school. A man of no particular age. Not old, exactly, but completely burnt out. I found out that during the events of May 1968 he'd burned every book in his library in public. A sort of auto-da-fé, in a burst of revolutionary zeal. Afterwards I never looked at him the same way. I watched him in class and wondered what was left of that spark of madness.

A pause.

Pierre – Jeff?

Jeff *(smiling)* – I lit the fire. Isn't that enough?

They go on watching the fire in silence. Josiane picks up a piece of the chair to throw on the flames, then stops to examine and weigh it.

Josiane – Strange. It weighs almost nothing. It's completely hollowed out inside...

The others, still in their reverie, don't pay attention to her.

Josiane – I read an article about termites in Le Chasseur Français. Terrifying, apparently. You never see them. For years they quietly eat their way through everything made of wood, right up to the roof timbers. Then one fine day the whole roof falls in, without warning.

The others look at one another, unsure whether to laugh or worry. Then they look up at the ceiling. Jeff takes the piece of wood and examines it.

Frédérique – So?

Jeff *(uncertain)* – It could just be woodworm. I don't know. I've never seen a termite. What do they look like?

Pierre *(to Josiane)* – Wasn't there a picture in your article?

Josiane – I didn't notice. They live in colonies, like ants and bees.

Pierre – But they don't make honey...

Josiane examines the chair she's sitting on.

Josiane – This chair's pretty badly eaten too.

The others cast a worried look at their chairs, as if suddenly afraid that they might collapse under their weight.

Pierre – Perhaps we should check the roof timbers in the attic.

Jeff *(getting up)* – I don't know if we have a ladder.

Pierre gets up too and goes out with Jeff. Josiane and Frédérique watch them leave, worried.

Frédérique – Damn it! That would be a disaster!

Josiane – You're telling me. Imagine the roof falling on us tonight. *(a pause)* Just as well we've signed the sale.

Frédérique looks at her, outraged.

Frédérique – Hang on. If it's true, we can't just pretend we don't know.

Josiane – We didn't know when we signed...

Frédérique – That would be fraud! We can't take that responsibility. Imagine the buyers being buried alive. They might have children...

Josiane – That's their problem. You're supposed to check the roof timbers before buying a house...

A moment.

Josiane – Or we could set fire to the place before we leave. The insurance would pay. Houses catch fire every day...

Frédérique – The day after selling it? The insurers would be suspicious. There'd be an investigation. Insurance fraud could cost us a fortune.

Jeff and Pierre come back.

Josiane – So?

Jeff – Hard to say. We couldn't see much. The roof timbers look rather rotten, but then they're very old. We'd need an expert to examine them.

Frédérique – That would be safer, wouldn't it? We could be in serious trouble...

Pierre – I don't know the law on this, but the buyer could certainly sue us if he discovers we sold him a house riddled with termites. Replacing the roof timbers alone could cost half the price of the house.

Josiane – And if we have to pay for a new roof, we might as well not sell the place at all.

Pierre *(sighing)* – I knew it was too good to be true...

Frédérique – So what do we do?

Jeff – We'll see tomorrow, but we ought to warn the buyer and have an inspection done. Better to be safe. The last thing we want is a lawsuit a year from now...

Frédérique – And a claim for damages...

Josiane – Some inheritance this is! And I was wondering where all that dust came from...

Frédérique *(rising)* – I think we'd better go to bed.

Josiane *(worried)* – Is it really safe to sleep here? Perhaps we should go to a hotel...

Pierre – Statistically it would be extraordinary bad luck if the roof fell in tonight of all nights, when we haven't all been here together for fourteen years.

They are about to head towards the bedrooms.

Jeff *(joking)* – Just try not to sneeze too loudly.

They laugh.

Blackout.

The following morning

Frédérique sits alone in the living room, smoking as she finishes her coffee. She is already dressed and made up. Josiane enters in her nightdress, looking decidedly unwell. She pokes a little finger into her ear, trying to unblock it.

Josiane – My ears are completely blocked... I'm sure that little Portuguese boy gave me mumps...

Frédérique *(perplexed)* – Who?

Josiane – On the train! One of those Portuguese children...

Frédérique prefers not to insist.

Josiane – And that spaghetti's made me terribly thirsty. I hope the sauce wasn't too far past its use-by date. *(pouring herself a glass of water and looking at her sister)* You look dreadful too...

Frédérique *(annoyed)* – I didn't sleep well, that's all...

Josiane – Is it because of your argument with Pierre at lunchtime yesterday? You know what he's like. He always says what everyone else is thinking but daren't say aloud...

Frédérique looks at her, puzzled, but prefers not to respond. Josiane pours herself a cup of coffee.

Josiane – I slept badly too. Those termites. I dreamt they were eating us alive in the night. Starting with our brains.

Frédérique looks puzzled. Josiane tries a sip of coffee, pulls a face and clutches her stomach.

Josiane – This coffee makes me feel sick... *(a pause)* I think I'm going to be sick...

Josiane leaves and crosses paths with Pierre, who arrives, not very awake.

Pierre – Oh dear. You don't look too lively either.

Frédérique *(icily)* – Thank you. Josiane just said the same thing.

Pierre pours himself a coffee.

Pierre – I meant me as well... Once you're past fifty, if Cinderella goes to bed after midnight, she wakes up with a head like a pumpkin...

Frédérique – Now you're Cinderella?

Pierre – You women can at least put on make-up before you go out.

Frédérique – I'm wearing make-up...

Pierre stirs his coffee.

Pierre – Sorry. Christmas always depresses me. It makes me unpleasant to everybody. I don't know why. Well, I have my suspicions...

Silence.

Frédérique – Once, before leaving for work, Dad took me aside in his car. I must have been five or six. He told me Father Christmas didn't exist. Out of the blue. I hadn't asked him anything. At first I was rather proud. It made me feel grown-up. But I soon realised what he meant by it...

Pierre – Whenever he wanted to remind us how naive we were, he'd say sarcastically, "What are you, still believing in Father Christmas?"

Frédérique – To get my own back I told the teacher's daughter that Father Christmas didn't exist. Next morning her mother slapped me twice. Not only was there no Father Christmas, I wasn't even allowed to say so!

Pierre – Do we have to forgive our parents everything just because they may have had unhappy childhoods too?

Frédérique – I thought becoming a mother myself would make me more forgiving towards mine. But it didn't. It only showed me how much affection they'd failed to give us.

Josiane returns, dressed, carrying a rubbish bag.

Josiane – Jeff still isn't ready? He's always the last one up... I'm going to throw away the leftover spaghetti before it starts to stink. That sauce didn't smell very good even when we ate it... *(a pause)* I've been sick in the bag as well, so I wouldn't block the sink...

The other two are speechless. Josiane goes out with the bag. Jeff comes in, once again moving on autopilot, but this time dressed and ready to leave. He pours himself a coffee.

Frédérique – Time to say goodbye to this house... Our last breakfast together here. Just like when we were children...

Embarrassed silence.

Frédérique – Nothing says we can't see one another again...

Pierre – Yes... *(bitterly)* But is it really good for us?

Josiane hurries back.

Josiane *(dramatically)* – Someone's stolen our dustbin!

Pierre *(sarcastically)* – Was there anything valuable in it?

Jeff, intrigued, goes outside to check.

Josiane – Incredible! People even steal dustbins now. And this is supposed to be the countryside!

A pause. Jeff comes back.

Jeff – It wasn't stolen. It burnt. It was made of plastic, so there's nothing left. We're lucky it didn't set fire to the house.

Jeff gives Josiane a suspicious look.

Jeff – You didn't put the ashes from the fireplace in the bin last night, did you?

Frédérique and Pierre also turn their gaze towards Josiane.

Josiane – I thought there were no embers left...

Jeff – There must have been some still smouldering under the ashes.

Pierre – Perhaps we needn't call the police, then...

Josiane – It's shocking how easily these dustbins catch fire. Very dangerous.

The others exchange a brief glance, accustomed to Josiane's lack of sincerity.

Pierre – Better bury what's left in the garden. Between the fumes from the Bolognese sauce, Josiane's vomit and the red-hot embers, it could set off some unpredictable chemical reaction...

Jeff *(absently)* – There's a spade in the tool shed.

Everyone looks at him.

Jeff *(getting the message, resigned)* – All right, I'll do it...

Josiane continues along her own tortuous train of thought.

Josiane – That physiotherapist had a strange first name...

Pierre – William.

Josiane – That's right, William... Sounds like a name for a sucker. Buying this wreck of a house... I'd have given him my telephone number, only... He did seem rather...

Pierre – A bit what...?

Josiane – Didn't you notice he was gay?

Uncomfortable, Frédérique glances at Pierre, who decides to speak.

Pierre – There's something I need to tell you. I might as well tell you now...

Josiane listens. Frédérique gives him an encouraging smile.

Pierre – The physiotherapist who bought the house. William. He's... a friend of mine.

Frédérique looks as surprised as Josiane. She was expecting a very different sort of revelation.

Frédérique – Well, you certainly seem determined to surprise us...

Josiane *(completely lost)* – That gay physiotherapist... So he bought the house on your behalf?

Frédérique – Why didn't you say something? We could have worked something out if you wanted to keep the house...

Pierre – I thought it might get complicated...

Frédérique *(sarcastically)* – Ah. Much simpler this way, obviously.

Josiane – And you've got yourself a good deal into the bargain...

Pierre – The house was on the market for over a year. Nobody wanted it...

The others fall silent, each unsettled in a different way by the revelation.

Pierre – Anyway, you've just sold us a house that may be completely riddled with termites...

Josiane *(more confused than ever)* – Sold you? You mean you're buying it together...?

Frédérique comes to Pierre's rescue.

Frédérique – He's more than just a friend, Josiane. Do we really have to spell it out?

Josiane finally understands.

Josiane *(amused)* – Oh, I see! I thought as much...

Frédérique *(ironically)* – Women's intuition...

Pierre – You'll always be welcome in this house...

Jeff comes back from the garden.

Jeff – Well, this is incredible!

Frédérique – You can say that again...

But Jeff is talking about something else.

Jeff – Look what I found when I was digging a hole in the garden for the rubbish!

He shows a bone.

Josiane – What's this?

Pierre – That looks remarkably like a thighbone...

Frédérique – You mean... a human bone?

Pierre *(to Jeff)* – Was there a whole skeleton?

Jeff – I didn't dig any further. I don't know what you put in that rubbish bag, but it smelt terrible. I threw it all into the hole and filled it in as quickly as I could.

Josiane – We could tell the police, but... Just imagine! A body buried in our garden! We could get into trouble...

Frédérique looks a bit embarrassed.

Frédérique – If it really is human, whose bone could it be?

A pause.

Pierre – It might be Dad...

The others are appalled that he should make such a joke. But Pierre isn't joking.

Pierre – The last time Mum came here, Dad was with her. After that we never saw him again. How do we know he really went back to the Amazon...?

Josiane *(to Pierre)* – Goodness me... Lucky your gay boyfriend bought this place. At least it's staying in the family!

Jeff *(bewildered)* – Who's gay...?

Josiane – Pierre!

Frédérique *(no longer certain of anything)* – At least he's a sympathiser...

Jeff tries to take this in. Pierre says nothing, either because he doesn't wish to contradict her or because he hasn't heard, so absorbed is he in studying the supposed femur.

Frédérique – Let's not jump to conclusions. It could be a cow bone for all we know.

Pierre – It really does look like a femur...

Frédérique – Since when are you an expert on femurs?

Pierre – My boyfriend's a physiotherapist. I used to help him revise for his exams...

Jeff – But why would anyone bury a cow in our garden?

Josiane – Perhaps the neighbour's a serial killer and buries his victims here so nobody suspects him...

Pierre – If we're going to spend holidays here again, I'd rather Mum had murdered Dad. That's less worrying than having a psychopath next door...

Frédérique – We're not going to solve this now. I suggest we get out of here, take the bone back to Paris and see what we can find out.

They all agree. Jeff puts the bone on the table. To take their minds off it, they resume their preparations for departure. Everyone goes to collect their luggage. Josiane returns carrying a large extra bag in addition to her suitcase.

Pierre *(suspiciously)* – Didn't you have only one suitcase when you arrived?

Josiane – I'm taking a few souvenirs! At least the termites won't get those...

Jeff *(to Pierre)* – Have you switched off the power?

Pierre – Yes... *(hesitating)* I'll check again.

Pierre goes out for a moment to check the electrical supply, then returns.

Pierre – All done. We can go.

The four siblings are about to leave the house, their bags in hand.

Jeff *(taking one last look around)* – Have we forgotten anything?

Pierre – I'll take the femur. I can show it to William...

Jeff – Who's William?

Frédérique – We'll explain later...

Josiane – We came here to sort out the inheritance, and I have a feeling we're not out of the woods yet...

Jeff, Frédérique and Josiane leave. Pierre is the last to go. His small bag in his hand, he picks up the family portrait from the mantelpiece and studies it for a moment with a bitter smile.

Pierre – Memories... They don't take up much room, but they're heavy to carry.

The others call from outside.

Frédérique *(off)* – Pierre?

Jeff *(off)* – Are you coming?

Josiane *(off)* – What's he doing?

Pierre puts the portrait back where he found it.

Pierre – Coming! *(picking up the bone from the table)* Nearly forgot Dad's femur! *(to himself)* Now the family's finally reunited... *(looking at the bone)* Well, it's a start...

Pierre leaves.

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 ...
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
Hold on, Butterfly
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

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