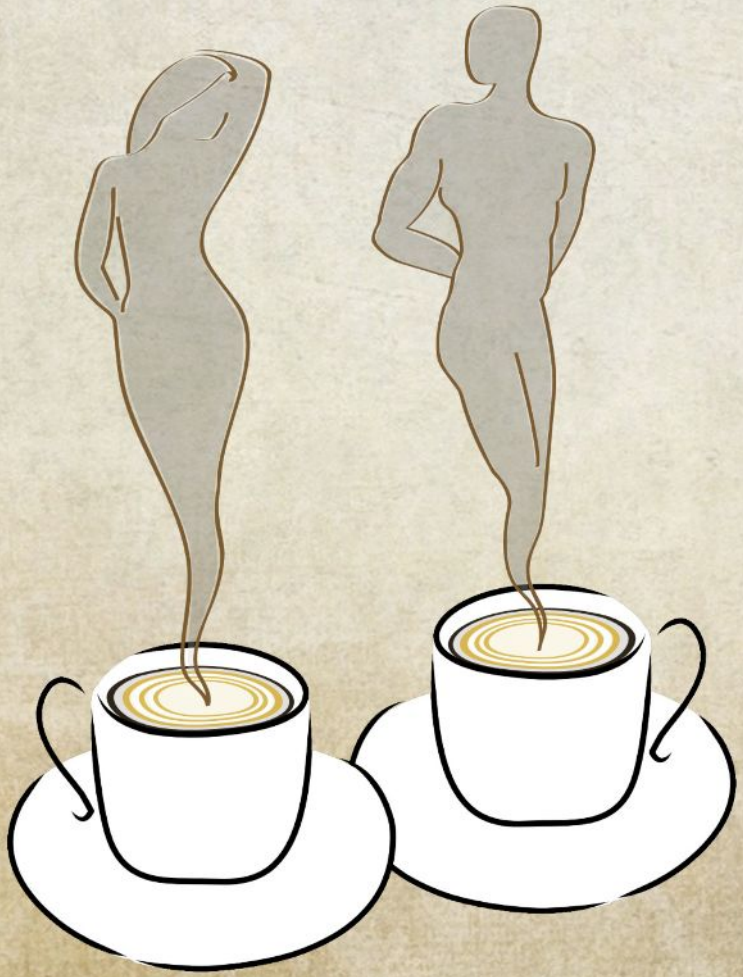
La Comédiathèque

Preliminaries

Jean-Pierre Martinez



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Preliminaries

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

A man and a woman see each other every day in a café. Sitting alone at separate tables, they observe each other discreetly, intrigued but not quite daring to speak. Will they give in to the desire to meet, even if reality may fall short of their fantasies? Getting to know someone means giving up countless possibilities. Yet remaining forever at the preliminaries risks missing what matters most...

Characters
Him
Her

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Scene 1

A man and a woman are sitting in a café, each at a separate table. Between them, slightly further back, stands a third, empty table with a few newspapers on it. They both have notebooks and occasionally jot something down. They avoid meeting each other's eyes, though now and then each steals a glance at the other. The man stands and addresses the audience. The woman stays where she is, apparently unaware of him.

Him – See that woman, sitting over there? She's here every morning. Sometimes she arrives just before me, sometimes just after. Around eight. She orders a coffee and stays for about three quarters of an hour. Always alone, apparently lost in thought. Every so often she writes something in her notebook. What? I've no idea. She's a mystery. Every woman is a mystery until you speak to her and she answers—assuming she's willing. A mystery, and therefore a promise. The promise of a journey. An adventure. A leap into the unknown. All the excitement and danger of meeting someone else... Of course I could get up and talk to her. But it isn't only shyness that stops me. Or the fear of being brushed off. You can always find a harmless excuse to approach a stranger without immediately venturing onto the slippery ground of a chat-up line...

He takes a tiny object from his pocket, walks over and shows her something in his open palm.

Him – Excuse me, miss... or perhaps madam? I found an earring under this table yesterday morning. You usually sit here, so I wondered whether you might have lost it...

She looks offended, glances at the earring, gives a disdainful shake of her head and returns to her notebook. He turns back to the audience.

Him – At worst, she'd politely say it wasn't hers. End of conversation. I'd know where I stood and keep my dignity. At best, if she found me even slightly interesting, she might take the opening and start talking.

He holds out his palm again. She picks up the earring, examines it and hands it back with a broad smile.

Her – No... Unfortunately it isn't mine. What a pity, it's lovely. If you happen to find the other one... But please, sit down. We see each other here every day and we've never actually spoken.

He withdraws and addresses the audience again. She returns to her notebook and ignores him.

Him – No, what stops me isn't fear of rejection. Being given the cold shoulder. 'Connection failed', as people say these days. No. What frightens me is being disappointed. I'm sure this charming young woman is a fascinating conversationalist, but once I know who she is, her name, her job, whether she's married, and especially what she's writing in that little notebook... that will be that. She won't be the mysterious stranger from the café any more, the woman who could be anything, who promises everything. She'll be Louise, a divorced primary-school teacher with a three-year-old boy, writing school reports. Or Justine, a single actress jotting down ideas for the one-woman show she's dreamt of writing for years, the one that will finally make her famous. Or Marina, newly arrived from abroad to marry an ageing pharmacist; to stave off boredom—and before she dares cheat on her husband—she writes down a list of her desires, then decides whom she'd like to sleep with to satisfy them. For now she is every one of these women, and countless others. All women. But once we're introduced, she'll be just one woman, and I'll already miss all the others she'll never be.

He takes a newspaper from the middle table, sits down and leafs through it. She glances at him, rises and addresses the audience in turn.

Her – I wonder who that man is... I can see him watching me when he thinks I'm not looking. He must be shy. We've been coming here every morning for months, and he hasn't dared say a word. Unless he simply isn't interested... I'm not good enough for him, is that it? Who does he think he is? He's hardly irresistible himself. And if he had anything important to do, he wouldn't spend so long in this café every morning. What's he reading? His horoscope? The job ads? He does look rather idle. Perhaps he's unemployed... Idle, but not exactly desperate. That little ironic smile. That vaguely superior air. As if he's saying, 'I'm keeping quiet, but don't think I haven't got an opinion.' I wonder what he writes in that notebook with such an inspired expression. His profoundest thoughts, no doubt. I'd love to see them. A moment ago I thought he might get up and speak to me. But no, he lost his nerve again. Unless he's a writer, taking notes for his next novel. Perhaps his heroine will look a little like me. That's it. He'd rather keep our story imaginary. I wonder what he pictures when he looks at me...

She takes a small mirror out of her bag and studies her reflection.

Her – If I spotted myself in a café, what would I imagine? *(She puts the mirror away.)* I don't know. Do I look like the person I really am? Could I pass for somebody else? If he comes over, I think I'll lie. Invent a whole new life. Just to see whether I could make him believe it. When a stranger approaches you, by definition you know nothing about him. He could be anybody and tell you anything. But he knows nothing about you either. For a few moments, at least, before you're embarrassingly found out, you can choose who you want to be that day. Perhaps you'll even become that person, little by little. Another life... But which one? I'd have to work on the character. Give myself a name, a job, an age. I might as well make myself younger. Not ridiculously younger: it would have to be convincing. Two or three years. Oh, why not five? I could probably get away with five. What about a foreign accent? No, too difficult to keep up. Besides, I could come from another country and speak the language perfectly. But for this new life to begin, he'd first have to speak to me. Perhaps I could smile at him? It might encourage him. Though I can hardly stare into his eyes with a silly grin on my face. What would he think of me? Or I could approach him. Find an excuse. Something simple...

She discreetly removes her earrings, slips one into her bag and keeps the other in her hand. She peers under the table as though searching for something, then rises and goes over to him. He puts down his newspaper and watches her approach, puzzled.

Her – Excuse me, I lost an earring like this yesterday. It meant a lot to me. It was a present from... Well, I was very fond of it. You haven't happened to find it, have you?

Him – An earring...? I... No, I haven't found anything. I'm terribly sorry, but...

Her – But?

Him – No, nothing. I... No, I haven't seen it.

Her – Right. Thank you.

She goes back to her table and addresses the audience.

Her – Imagine going to all that trouble to break the ice and getting such a vacant look in return! A writer? As if. No, I'd rather not risk an ordinary encounter. I'll hang on to my illusions a little longer. Though perhaps he isn't quite as stupid as he looks. I did take him by surprise. Men are so used to making the first move. When a woman takes the initiative, they panic. They freeze. You saw him, didn't you? The moment I looked at him, he was like a rabbit caught in the headlights, already imagining himself in the cooking pot. Poor thing. I frightened him. I hope I haven't traumatised him. That earring business was a bit far-fetched, I admit. I'll think of something better tomorrow...

She goes back to scribbling in her notebook; he returns to his newspaper.

Blackout.

Scene 2

She is reading the newspaper and he is writing in his notebook. He stops, looks at her for a moment, then addresses the audience.

Him – Every day I tell myself: today I'll finally speak to her. And every day I put it off until tomorrow. I'm prolonging the pleasure. Platonic love is all very well, but falling in love with a complete stranger is even better, isn't it? You're guaranteed never to be disappointed. The trouble with love is that we project an image onto someone, then blame them for failing to live up to it. With a woman you don't know, you can keep dreaming. Mistake your wishes for reality. Yes, the ideal woman is the one you haven't met yet. Every morning I watch her come into this café. Or she's already here if I'm late. For nearly an hour she exists in front of me, then she leaves. Outside this here and now, she has no existence for me. A bit like theatre. I choose the role she'll play that day, according to my mood. And when she leaves the stage, after playing a different character each time, she vanishes into nothingness. The greatest actor is smaller than even the smallest part they play. The costume never quite fits, and the stage is the only place where nobody notices. So I wait. I keep putting off the moment when getting to know her will break the spell. But what if she isn't here tomorrow? Or the next day? What if she never comes back? Having been every woman, she'd become no woman at all. Just a faint memory, gradually fading. There's an old song about the people who pass through our lives, and whom we never manage to hold on to. No. I'm not going to let this one pass me by. Here goes. No safety net. I'm stepping onto the stage myself, only I haven't learnt any lines. I haven't a clue what I'll say. At least it'll sound natural. Sincere. My awkwardness might even help. Anything's better than that ridiculous earring story. I'll improvise. Whatever I say, she'll soon make it clear if she isn't interested. And if she is.

He walks over. She looks up as he approaches but remains impassive.

Him – Excuse me, I...

Her – Yes...?

Him – I see you sitting here opposite me every day, and I thought perhaps...

Her – Perhaps what...?

Him – Well, we might... get to know each other.

Her – Get to know each other?

Him – I'm sorry. I can see I'm disturbing you. It was a stupid idea. Sorry. I'll leave you alone...

Her *(firmly)* – Sit down.

Him – Yes.

He sits.

Her – My name's Virginie. And yours?

Him – Er... Paul.

Her – Well, Paul and Virginie, then.

Him – Er... Yes...

Her – And what do you do, Paul?

Him – I'm a... writer.

Her – Really?

Him – Does that surprise you?

Her – That's exactly what I'd imagined. That's what surprises me.

Him – So you had imagined something about me...

Her – Don't get carried away.

Him – Do I really look like a writer?

Her – I don't know. Perhaps. And you're always writing in that little notebook.

Him – Fair enough, but you write in a notebook too. Don't tell me you're a writer as well.

Her – As a matter of fact, I am!

Him – Really?

Her – Why not?

Him – Of course... Novels?

Her – Plays, actually. What about you?

Him – Short stories.

Her – I see...

Him – I know what you're thinking.

Her – What?

Him – He writes short stories because he can't manage a whole novel.

Her – Not at all! Besides, you could say the same about me.

Him – Oh?

Her – She writes plays because she's incapable of writing a novel.

Him – True...

Her – Actually, I don't really write plays.

Him – No?

Her – Sketches, mostly.

Him – A sketch is to a play what a short story is to a novel.

Her – Yes... A minor genre. *(A pause.)* Are you really a writer?

Him – Perhaps not. Are you?

Her – Not really.

Him – So you lied to me.

Her – You started it, didn't you?

Him – Yes, but you didn't know that.

Her – Why choose 'writer'?

Him – I don't know. I suppose I was afraid of disappointing you.

Her – We haven't even met properly and you're already afraid of disappointing me. You're not very confident, are you, Paul?

Him – Or perhaps I tend to think rather too highly of people I don't know.

Her – How flattering.

Him – Sorry, that's not what I meant. Well... not exactly.

Her – So what do you really do that's so shameful you have to invent another job? Sell mobile phone contracts door to door?

Him – No.

Her – Work in telemarketing?

Him – No.

Her – Chase people for unpaid taxes?

Him – I'm not that bad.

Her – But you're not proud of what you do.

Him – No. Are you?

Her – No.

Him – Then perhaps we should keep a little mystery between us.

Her – Probably for the best.

Him – Shall we stick with 'writers'?

Her – All right.

Him – In that case, I write six-hundred-page novels, and you write plays that last more than three hours, without an interval.

Her – If we're going to lie, why sell ourselves short?

A pause.

Him – So I'm a novelist.

Her – And I'm a playwright.

Him – Are you married?

Her – Unlike a job, that's what market researchers call a closed question. Either you're married or you're not.

Him – You can still lie in your answer.

Her – Yes, but it doesn't leave much room for imagination.

Him – Still, adultery is always a more romantic story.

Her – True.

Him – The answer isn't necessarily binary, though. You might be divorced. Or widowed...

Her – Widowed...

Him – Why not?

Her – Yes...

Him – Are you a widow?

Her – I'm a widow.

Him – I'm so sorry.

Her – You couldn't have known. And it's not your fault, is it? You didn't murder my husband.

Him – Oh, was he murdered?

Her – Did I say that?

Him – You said I didn't murder him.

Her – I only meant you weren't responsible for his death.

Him – So he wasn't murdered.

Her – No. He died in a much more ordinary way. Almost stupidly, I'm afraid...

Him – Dying is always a bit stupid.

Her – Yes, but this...

Him – I don't want to pry, but I must say you've made me curious.

Her – It happened on our honeymoon in the Seychelles.

Him – You're right, it starts very conventionally. Like a romantic novel. I hope it gets better.

Her – May I continue?

Him – Please.

Her – We'd spent the afternoon on a beautiful beach. Glorious sunshine. We were about to go back to the hotel when a storm suddenly blew up. Jean-Louis...

Him – His name was Jean-Louis?

Her – Yes. Why?

Him – No reason.

Her – Would you have preferred a different name? Steven, perhaps? Kevin?

Him – Jean-Louis is fine. So, the storm...

Her – The wind picked up. Jean-Louis grabbed the pole of our beach umbrella just as the gale threatened to carry it away, and that was when...

She hesitates, seemingly overcome with emotion.

Him – Yes?

Her – A flash of fire struck him...

Him – What? An alien attack?

Her – I told you it was a perfectly ordinary death.

Him – Oh yes, sorry. I do tend to...

Her – Lightning. Just lightning. The umbrella acted like a lightning conductor. Jean-Louis was struck. Killed instantly.

Him – Oh, hell.

Her – So in the end I was only married for a week.

Him – If this were a romantic novel, we could call it 'Love at First Strike in the Seychelles'.

Her – But romantic novels have happy endings. I've never got over losing Jean-Louis...

She looks close to tears. He hesitates.

Him – But... is this true?

She abruptly becomes impassive again.

Her – What do you think?

Him – I don't know. It's so...

Her – Stupid? I told you. A stupid death.

Him – Well, at least you're free now.

Her – Are you?

Him – Me?

Her – Are you free?

Him – Yes... Well, I'm married, but I'm free.

Her – Now you've got me intrigued.

Him – It's simple, you'll see.

Her – I'm listening.

Him – You see, I'm free. It's my wife who isn't.

Her – Your wife isn't free?

Him – She's in prison.

Her – Right...

Him – So she's not free. But I am...

Her – Yes, I understand. But how long is she in prison for?

Him – Ten years, if all goes well.

Her – If all goes well?

Him – With time off for good behaviour.

Her – I don't want to pry either, but... what did she do to end up in prison?

Him – Attempted murder.

Her – I see...

Him – She tried to kill me.

Her – Right...

Him – Fortunately for her—and, incidentally, for me—I survived.

Her – How did she try to kill you?

Him – In the most ordinary way. With a revolver.

Her – And she missed.

Him – That's not quite how it happened.

Her – Tell me.

Him – I was already suspicious. I went through her things and found a revolver she'd hidden in her handbag.

Her – So you took it away.

Him – No.

Her – Why not?

Him – She'd have become suspicious. And she might have tried something else, like... poison.

Her – Yes. Poison is much more feminine.

Him – So, rather than alert her, I swapped the bullets for blanks. That way I stayed in control without her realising anything.

Her – Very clever.

Him – Yes... Except somehow I got things mixed up.

Her – A writer getting his lines crossed...

Him – I replaced the first five bullets, all right. But the sixth...

Her – The sixth?

Him – I took it in the shoulder.

Her – Oh dear.

Him – She wasn't supposed to fire all six shots at me, either. Still, I was lucky.

Her – You call that lucky?

Him – A bullet in the shoulder is better than one through the heart.

Her – Women can be terribly clumsy with firearms. That's why poison... But if you don't mind my asking, what on earth had you done to make that poor woman want to fire six shots at you?

Him – Another perfectly ordinary story. Rather like yours.

Her – Oh, don't be modest. You've clearly outdone me. Go on.

Him – I was cheating on her. That's all.

Her – Cheating on her? With whom?

Him – A stranger I met in a café. This café, actually. Funny, she always sat in the very chair you're sitting in.

Her – Not at the same time, I imagine.

Him – No. She came in late afternoon. Around five or six.

Her – And when your wife gets out of prison...

Him – My wife?

Her – Yes, your wife.

Him – Well, I hope she'll have forgiven my infidelity. Just as I've forgiven her for trying to kill me.

Her – So as long as she's locked up, you're free.

Him – Exactly.

Her – Why not? That gives us a good ten years.

Him – Maybe longer. If she doesn't behave herself.

A pause.

Her – And you say you're not a writer.

Him – Who knows? I must have lied, either when I said I was or when I suggested I might not be. What do you think?

Her – If you're not a writer, you really ought to become one.

Him – Thank you. And you?

Her – Me?

Him – Are you really a playwright?

She checks her watch.

Her – I'm sorry, I have to go.

Him – Of course. This is when you usually leave.

Her – Yes...

Him – Where to? Another mystery.

She gets up.

Her – See you tomorrow, then... perhaps.

Him – Perhaps.

Her – As long as you have a good story for me, I won't miss one of our meetings.

Him – That reminds me of another story.

Her – We could call ours 'A Thousand and One Mornings'.

Him – I never imagined myself as Scheherazade.

Her – If you'd rather be the sultan, we can swap roles from time to time.

Him – We'll need plenty of imagination, then.

Her – I'm sure you've got lots of other stories in that notebook.

Him – And you in yours.

She leaves. He watches her go, then turns towards the audience.

Him – Excuse me, but... I need to get back to work.

He sits down, thinks for a moment, and starts writing in his notebook.

Blackout.

Scene 3

He is still sitting at his table, writing in his notebook. She enters.

Her – Paul?

He looks up, recognises her and smiles.

Him – Hello!

She takes a gun from her bag and points it at him. His smile freezes.

Her – You thought you could get away with it, did you?

Him – What on earth...?

Her – Were you meeting her here?

Him – Her?

Her – Virginie. That's her name, isn't it?

Him – No! I don't know anyone called Virginie, I swear.

Her – Of course. But this time you won't get away with a bullet in the shoulder.

Him – Please, darling, don't do anything stupid!

Her – This one's loaded, believe me. And not with blanks!

Him – But you got ten years! Have they let you out already?

Her – I escaped.

Him – Escaped? How?

Her – I carved a revolver out of bread, let it dry and covered it in shoe polish.

Him – A revolver made of bread?

Her – Exactly.

Him – Is... is that the one?

She hesitates.

Her – Yes...

She lowers the gun, puts it on the table and sits down. He picks it up and examines it.

Him – Impressive. It looks just like a real one.

He puts the gun back down.

Her – I took a guard hostage. They never suspected a thing. Now where is she?

Him – Who?

Her – Don't play games with me! That bitch you're cheating on me with!

Him – I don't know. She hasn't come in today.

Her – She must have guessed something was wrong.

Him – Maybe.

Her – Pity. I could have killed you both at once.

Him – With a gun made of bread?

Her – What does she have that I haven't? At least tell me that.

Him – I don't know her.

Her – What?

Him – That's what she has that you haven't. I don't know her.

Her – She's your mistress, but you don't know her?

Him – We meet here every day. Every time she gives me a different name. Invents a different character. Once she even pretended to be you.

Her – But you still sleep with her, don't you?

Him – Sleeping with her, as you put it... that would mean getting to know her far too well.

Her – Stop confusing me. Is she your mistress or not?

Him – I don't know. Yes, I suppose so. You could put it that way.

Her – Poor Paul. Why wear yourself out inventing stories like that? When the whole story is so utterly ordinary.

Him – You're right. However hard we try, even when we lie, words always fall short of what we'd really like to say. Talking is inevitably disappointing. As a rule, perhaps it's better not to speak to anyone.

Her – I haven't understood a word of that. You've got me worried, Paul. Perhaps you're the one who ought to be locked up.

Him – Maybe.

She gets up.

Her – If you see her, tell her I'm looking for her. And even if my revolver is made of bread, this time it's loaded with real bullets.

Him – Where are you going?

Her – I'm on the run, remember? I can't stay here.

Him – Is there anything I can do?

Her – Have you got any money on you?

Him – Yes...

Her – Give it to me.

He searches his pockets and hands her a few banknotes.

Him – That's all I've got.

Her – Don't worry, I'll pay you back.

Him – It's not the money I'm worried about. Will we see each other again?

Her – Who knows? In ten years, perhaps. Or longer. I doubt I'll get any time off for good behaviour now.

Him – I'll visit you. I promise.

Her – In the visiting room?

Him – Whenever we talk to someone, it's a bit like a prison visit, isn't it? We talk, lie, pretend to understand each other, pretend to believe each other, and when the conversation ends we each go back to our own private cell.

Her – Still better than sharing a cell with only one person to talk to.

Him – True. Come to think of it, prison is rather like marriage.

Her – A family can be another kind of cell. And it's often a life sentence, even with good behaviour.

Him – Especially with good behaviour.

Her – People do sometimes get married in prison. Strangely, though, never to their cellmate.

Him – Ten years... You could write a novel.

Her – What kind of novel could you write in prison?

Him – One about freedom, I suppose.

Her – I'll think about it.

He watches her go. She exits. He examines the gun lying on the table, then addresses the audience.

Him – I handled that rather well, don't you think?

Blackout.

Scene 4

She is sitting at her table, scribbling in her notebook. He enters and approaches.

Him – Excuse me... You're Jean-Louis's wife, aren't you? I mean... his widow.

She looks up at him.

Her – Who are you?

Him – I'm afraid I can't tell you my name. All I can say is that I was a colleague of your husband's.

Her – My husband worked in the vehicle registration office.

Him – Yes. That's where we were both supposed to work.

Her – Supposed to?

Him – It was a cover.

Her – A cover? So my husband...

Him – I can't give you any more details. I only wanted you to know he didn't die as foolishly as you think.

Her – He didn't?

Him – No.

Her – Well, it's very kind of you to try to convince me otherwise.

Him – Madam, your husband died for France.

Her – My husband was struck by lightning while trying to fold a beach umbrella in a storm.

Him – That is indeed the official version.

Her – Is there another one?

Him – Jean-Louis was struck by something, certainly. But it wasn't lightning.

Her – I'm listening.

Him – He was hit by a laser beam fired from a fighter jet flying at very high altitude.

Her – A fighter jet?

Him – Belonging to a foreign power.

Her – Why on earth would a foreign power want to eliminate my husband?

Him – Because he was a special agent. Like me.

Her – A secret agent, you mean? Like James Bond?

Him – If you like, yes.

Her – And I thought I was the widow of an insignificant civil servant.

Him – Believe me, madam, your husband was no ordinary clerk in a vehicle registration office. He died on a mission, defending his country. Like a hero.

Her – On a beach in the Seychelles?

Him – France has enemies everywhere. Even in the Seychelles.

Her – Why tell me all this now?

Him – To honour his memory and ease your terrible grief. Your husband didn't die in a stupid accident. He fell in the line of duty. If he wasn't awarded a posthumous medal—indeed, if he wasn't given a state funeral—that was to protect his identity. And yours.

Her – Do you think I'm in danger?

Him – I can't say any more. But if it helps, you're under permanent police protection. Extremely discreet, extremely effective.

Her – That's very reassuring.

Him – I must go now.

Her – Will I see you again?

Him – Don't worry. Even when you can't see me, I'll never be far away, ready to intervene at the slightest sign of danger. Your guardian angel, if you like.

Her – Thank you.

Him – Good day, madam.

He walks back to his table and sits down as if nothing had happened. She watches him for a moment, intrigued, then returns to her notebook.

Blackout.

Scene 5

He enters, looks around for her, but she is nowhere to be seen.

Him – There we are. She's not here. I haven't got her phone number and I don't even know her real name. It's certainly not Virginie. Or Scheherazade. *(To the audience.)* I suppose nobody here knows her either? So many people come and go in cafés. If I had to describe her, I wouldn't even know where to start. Beautiful eyes... A lovely smile... A particular way of walking, of brushing her hair aside. A mysterious scent that lingers when she passes. Not much of a description, is it? A private detective wouldn't get very far with that. I'm losing my mind. What am I saying? I'm not going to hire a detective to find a stranger I met in a café. Or report a missing person to the police when I don't even know her. Why not issue a nationwide missing-person alert while I'm at it? Maybe she comes at a different time now. Her working hours could have changed. Perhaps she starts later. It's absurd. How can you miss someone you don't even know so much? Most people you do know can disappear for a few days and you feel as though you're the one on holiday. Still... If I never see her again, or she only comes occasionally, I'll have to find a replacement. Part-time, perhaps. A stand-in. A temporary appointment. After all, one woman or another... Since I don't actually know her, surely it can't be hard to cast someone else in the role.

He scans the audience and fixes his gaze on a woman near the back, so that it is not quite clear whom he is addressing.

Him – Actually, she's not bad. Doesn't look much like her, but still... She might do. Madam, would you mind if I indulged in a few fantasies about you? From a considerable distance, of course. Don't worry. You too, sir. I'll never speak to you. I'd be too afraid you wouldn't live up to my hopes. Or I to yours, for that matter. No, our relationship will remain entirely platonic. Better still: completely virtual. No lingering glances, certainly no inappropriate ones. Safe distances will be maintained. All the necessary precautions. A muzzle, if required. You won't even realise you have a secret admirer. Agreed? Excellent. I'll sit over there, watch you discreetly from the corner of my eye, and imagine things. Then, when you've gone, I'll think of you now and again.

He sits down and takes out his notebook, writing a few things and occasionally glancing towards the woman.

Blackout.

Scene 6

She enters and looks around for him.

Her – I didn't come yesterday. I didn't want him to start thinking our chance encounters, however regular, were some sort of daily date. I wanted him to feel that delicious, painful sense of missing someone. Dependence, really. But today he's the one who isn't here. Perhaps he's tired of this entirely imaginary affair. *(Looking towards the back of the audience, in the direction of the woman he addressed earlier.)* Or perhaps he's met someone else who, for all the dreariness of her reality, at least lets him satisfy his most ordinary desires. What a shame. I was beginning to grow attached. But can you really fall in love with someone if you're determined never to know them? Even lies reveal something about us. Sometimes the character we invent says more about us than the person we really are. Perhaps he got frightened. Or he's simply on holiday. Ill. Even dead. He doesn't owe me an explanation, after all. And neither do I. We're a free couple. We don't even know each other! Never mind. I'll come back tomorrow.

She is about to leave when she notices a notebook on his usual table.

Her – Look, he's left his notebook. *(She hesitates.)* What shall I do? Take it and give it back when I see him? Or leave it here, where he can find it himself? I'll leave it. *(She turns to go.)* Though I could just have a quick look inside... No. That would be terribly nosy. It might be his diary. Still, what if someone else finds it and takes it away? *(She picks up the notebook.)* I'd better take it. It must mean a lot to him. But I promise I won't read it.

She leaves.

Blackout.

Scene 7

She is sitting at her usual table, writing in her notebook. He enters and approaches her.

Him – Hello. I've been away for a few days. I hope you haven't missed me too much.

She pretends to be surprised.

Her – Oh? Don't worry, I haven't been here either.

Him – In any case, it's good to see you again.

Her – Yes...

A slightly awkward pause.

Him – Sorry, I'll let you get on with your work.

Her – Oh no, I'm not working. Well, I am, but... I find it hard to think of it as work.

Him – Writing...

Her – Yes...

Him – Inspiration...

Her – If we knew where to find it, we wouldn't spend so much time looking in the wrong places.

Him – Inspiration is like lightning. You never know where or when it will strike. Sorry. I didn't mean to bring back painful memories.

Her – So you're short of inspiration?

Him – At the moment, you're the one inspiring me.

Her – You know nothing about me.

Him – Exactly. I can imagine anything. A stranger is a blank page.

Her – A story waiting to be written... *(A little embarrassed.)* Speaking of which... I found this.

She holds out the notebook.

Him – Oh yes...

Her – It is yours, isn't it?

Him – Did you open it?

Her – No! What sort of person do you take me for?

Him – Sorry.

He takes the notebook.

Her – I did open it.

Him – Of course.

Her – Are you angry?

Him – How could you resist temptation? It's the story of Eve and Paradise lost. We'd give anything to know.

Her – And once we know, we're always a little disappointed.

Him – We discover that by choosing knowledge we've given up all the wonderful possibilities of not knowing.

Her – Yes... But an apple can also be a trap.

Him – So you're Snow White now.

Her – What if you left the notebook there deliberately, so I'd find it?

Him – That's possible.

Her – Then everything in it might be another illusion. Something you've invented to conceal your real life. Assuming you have one.

Him – Either way, we're no longer on equal terms. You know what's in my notebook. I don't know what's in yours.

Her – True. *(She hands him her notebook.)* Here.

He takes it.

Him – You could have made it all up as well.

Her – Then we'd be even again.

He opens the notebook, glances inside, then looks at her with an enigmatic smile.

Blackout.

Scene 8

He is sitting at his table, writing in his notebook. She enters and addresses him.

Her – So, how's the novel coming along?

Him – Almost finished. I just need a title.

Her – Sometimes that's the hardest part.

Him – Yes... Like choosing a name for a child.

Her – But you've already written the novel. You know what it's about, so you only have to find a title that suits it. With a child, you have to choose a name before you know who they are.

Him – And risk saddling them with an identity that doesn't fit.

Her – We should let children choose their own names.

Him – At what age?

Her – I don't know.

Him – Or let everyone change their name several times over the course of their life.

Her – Better still, let everyone change their life several times. So what's your novel about?

Him – A man who sees a beautiful stranger in a café every day. He'd love to speak to her, but...

Her – If he does, she'll lose all her mystery, and much of her charm.

Him – On the other hand, if he doesn't, he'll miss the chance of a wonderful story. And lose her for ever.

Her – So he's torn. What's her name, this beautiful stranger of yours?

Him – Like the title, I haven't decided yet. And how's your play coming along?

Her – It's too early to talk about it.

Him – I see. Have you read the paper?

Her – Not yet. Any interesting news?

Him – As a writer, I'm mostly interested in the crime stories and other strange bits of news. That's where people generally reveal their worst side. And sometimes, rather more rarely, their best.

Her – The small stories can be far more interesting than the grand ones.

Him – A newspaper is to a café what the Bible is to a church. Come to think of it, the Bible probably began as a collection of curious incidents, retold and embellished until they became myths.

Her – So? Any interesting stories this morning?

He picks up a newspaper and shows her an article.

Him – Here's one at random. A woman serving time for trying to murder her husband escaped from prison after threatening the guards with a fake gun.

Her – A good writer could turn that into a novel.

Him – Or a play.

She takes the newspaper and points to another article.

Her – Here's another you might like: an unassuming employee of the vehicle registration office was actually an agent of the French intelligence service.

Him – Truth is often stranger than fiction.

Her – I won't distract you from your writing any longer. I'd hate to deprive your readers of a masterpiece.

She returns to her table. They both write in their notebooks.

Blackout.

Scene 9

She is sitting at her table. He enters and hands her a book.

Him – Here. This is for you.

Her – What is it?

Him – My first novel.

She takes the book and looks at the cover.

Her – So you finally found a title.

Him – What do you think?

Her – Preliminaries... That's rather suggestive.

Him – It's about two people meeting.

Her – Every encounter follows the rhythm of lovemaking.

Him – First come the preliminaries, when you imagine and explore each other in silence.

Her – For as long as possible.

Him – Then comes that brief moment when you finally speak and enter the other person's intimate world.

Her – Followed by an interminable spell of contentment and boredom, tinged with disappointment, which you try to hide with meaningless chatter.

Him – Until time passes, the disappointment fades and the longing to explore the unknown returns.

Her – And this time perhaps the preliminaries can go on for ever. Thank you for the book.

Him – In a way, I wrote it thanks to you.

Her – Is it about me?

Him – You... us...

Her – Us?

Him – Mostly me, actually. What about your play? How's that going?

Her – It's finished.

Him – Could I see it?

Her – I don't think so.

Him – Why not?

Her – Because we've just performed it.

They smile at each other. Blackout.

Scene 10

The man and woman are sitting together at the middle table, on which a few newspapers still lie. They drink coffee without speaking or looking at each other. Each picks up a newspaper and reads it. He puts his down first and gazes towards the back of the room.

Him – Have you noticed that girl over there?

She puts down her newspaper and looks the same way.

Her – Which girl?

Him – She's always here when we are. Exactly the same time, every day. Always at the same table.

Her – So?

Him – Nothing. I wonder who she is.

Her – What do you mean, who she is?

Him – I don't know. Her name. What she does for a living.

Her – Go and ask her.

Him – I wonder what she's writing in that little notebook.

Her – A shopping list, perhaps.

Him – It's possible.

Her – Cotton buds, tissues, toilet paper, sanitary pads...

Him – I was imagining something more romantic.

Her – Are you that interested in her?

Him – Her in particular? No. I'm just curious. I watch people and try to imagine their lives.

A pause.

Her – That's how we met, remember?

Him – Yes. When you were still a stranger to me.

Her – It was in a café.

Him – This café.

Her – Feels like yesterday.

Him – You were sitting at that table.

Her – You came over and said you'd found an earring.

A pause.

Him – I've still got it.

Her – What?

He takes something from his pocket and shows it to her.

Him – The earring.

Her – Do you still use it from time to time?

Him – No.

Her – It's pretty.

Him – I'll never know whom it belongs to. Somewhere in the world there's a woman walking around with its twin. A woman I'll never meet. Maybe even that one...

A pause.

Her – It was mine.

Him – What?

Her – That earring was mine.

Him – I don't believe you.

She takes something from her pocket and shows him.

Her – Look. I still carry the other one.

Him – Why didn't you tell me then?

Her – So you could carry on looking, I suppose.

He offers her the earring he's holding.

Him – Well, here. It's yours.

Her – Thank you.

An awkward little pause.

Him – Aren't you going to put them on?

She puts both earrings on. He looks at her and smiles.

Him – They're not... exactly the same.

Her – No. I never managed to find a matching pair.

Him – They suit you, anyway.

They look at each other.

Her – Excuse me, but...

Him – Yes?

Her – We see each other in this café every day, and we've never really spoken. Perhaps we could get to know each other...

He takes her hand.

Him – I'd rather you stayed a mystery a little longer.

They lean towards each other for a kiss.

Blackout.

The End.

About the author

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinez.net/

https://comediatheque.net/

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

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

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

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

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

https://jeanpierremartinezmusic.com/

Other plays by the same author translated in English:

Monologues
Happy Dogs
Like a fish in the air
Short Stories

Comedies for 2
A Thwarted Vocation
EuroStar
Heads and Tails
Him and Her
Is there a pilot in the audience?
Last chance encounter
New Year's Eve at the Morgue
Not even dead
Pentimento
Preliminaries
Running on empty
Russian Roulette at the Kremlin
The Costa Mucho Castaways
The Dressing Gown
The Joker
The Rope
The Window across the courtyard

Comedies for 3
A brief moment of eternity
A simple business dinner
An innocent little murder
Cards on the Table
Cheaters
Crash Zone
Fragile, Handle with care
Friday the 13th
Horizons
Ménage à trois
One small step for a woman, one giant leap backward for Mankind
The Ways of Chance

Comedies for 4
A Cuckoo's nest
A hell of a night
A Skeleton in the Closet
Back to stage
Bed and Breakfast
Casket for two
Crisis and Punishment
Déjà vu
Family Portrait
Family Tree
Four stars
Friday the 13th
Gay friendly
Hangover
Happy Hour
How to get rid of your best friends
Is there a critic in the audience?
Is there an author in the audience?
Just a moment before the end of the world
Lovestruck at Swindlemore Hall
One marriage out of two
Perfect In-laws
Quarantine
Requiem for a Stradivarius
Strip Poker
Surviving Mankind
The Deal
The Fishbowl
The Perfect Son-in-Law
The Pyramids
The Smell of Money
The Tourists
The Worst Best Man Ever

Comedies for 5 to 6
All's well that starts badly
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
Crisis and Punishment
Critical but Stable
Dead End Boulevard
In lieu of flowers...
King of Fools
The Castaways of New Year's Eve
The President's Draw
The Rebels
Traffic Jam on Graveyard Lane

Comedies for 7 or more
At the bar counter
Backstage Comedy
Blue Flamingos
Check to the Kings
Christmas Eve at the Police Station
False exit
In flagrante delirium
Just like a Christmas movie
Miracle at Saint Mary Juana Abbey
Music does not always soothe ...
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

All of Jean-Pierre Martinez's plays can be downloaded

free of charge from his websites:

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https://comediatheque.net/

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