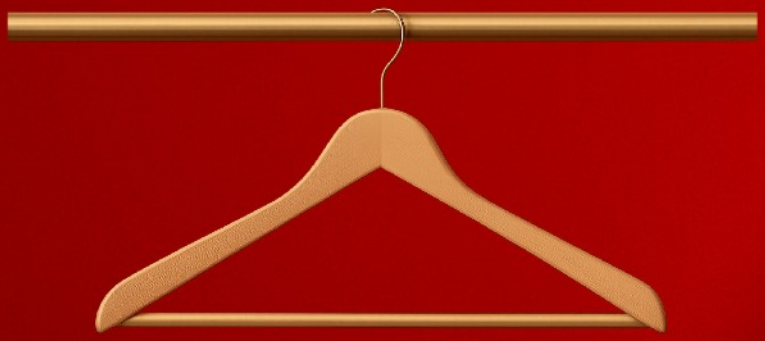
La Comédiathèque



The dressing gown

Jean-Pierre Martinez

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The Dressing Gown

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translation by the author

Franck and Clara, a bank employee and a nurse, lead a quiet life in a modest flat on the outskirts of Paris. Then Franck wins €400 in the lottery and treats himself to a magnificent… dressing gown.

Have you ever heard of the Diderot effect? It can be devastating…

Characters

Franck

Clara

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Scene 1

The living room of a modest flat in a public-housing block on the outskirts of Paris, furnished mainly with two rather worn armchairs. Clara enters, carrying bags from a discount supermarket. She is an ordinary working woman, exhausted after a long day. Her mobile phone rings. She puts down the bags and answers, looking utterly worn out.

Clara – Hello… *(She recognises the caller and softens)* Oh, Jessica! No, I've only just got home. *(She takes off her coat and collapses into an armchair)* How are things…? *(Her expression freezes)* No…? Lola? Oh, damn… I'm so sorry… When did it happen? I see… I see… Oh, damn… I don't know what to say… Seventeen? And what did she die of? Old age…? Well, seventeen is quite an age, isn't it? For a dog. Hang on, I'll ask ChatGPT… Seventeen for a dog is like ninety-one for a woman. No, of course it's not the same as losing your mother… Or your mother-in-law… Yes, given the choice, I might prefer that too, but still… You get attached to them. Anyway, I'm fine… Well… Things at the hospital are getting worse. With all the staff cuts, nurses have to do the cleaners' work as well. We rush about all day and hardly have time to speak to the patients. Sometimes I wonder whether I'd be better off in the private sector. A cosmetic surgery clinic, perhaps? I'd probably earn more. And be treated better. And in a private clinic… if I slept with the surgeon, perhaps I'd get a free nose job. Why my nose? I don't know, it just came to mind. I've never liked it. At a public hospital, though… Even if you slept with the director, I doubt they'd take your tonsils out for free. Anyway… That wasn't why I became a nurse. I thought I'd be useful, you know… Save lives. Like in those American hospital dramas I used to watch. Instead, I spend my days emptying bedpans and changing sheets… People talk about 'a dog's life', but dogs have it pretty good, don't they? We work to pay for their food, then go around picking up their mess! Honestly… And at least a dog's life doesn't last so long. Believe me, that poor animal is probably better off now… *(The doorbell rings)* I have to go. It'll be Franck. He's forgotten his keys again. And I have to put the frozen food away. On the bus, I thought my water had broken. The ice pops were melting all over my knees… No, I'm not pregnant! Why would you think that? I'll call you back… All right… Love you too… And give Steven a kiss for me…

She puts away her phone and opens the door. She returns with Franck, an utterly ordinary-looking man with a slightly absent-minded air.

Franck – Sorry, I left my keys in my desk drawer at the bank.

Clara – As usual…

He suddenly brightens with excitement.

Franck – Yes, but this time I've got a very good reason.

Clara – A good excuse for forgetting your keys?

Franck – A good reason for being distracted! Guess what?

Clara – What?

He waves a lottery ticket.

Franck – My lottery numbers came up!

Clara – Your lottery numbers?

Franck – Well, not all of them, but…

She suddenly becomes excited too.

Clara – We've won the jackpot? We're millionaires?

He tries to curb his enthusiasm so as not to raise false hopes.

Franck – Not quite… I only got four numbers, but still…

Clara – How much?

Franck – Four hundred euros.

She is clearly disappointed.

Clara – Ah… I should have known…

Franck – It's still four hundred euros. Aren't you pleased?

Clara – Yes, of course. It's just that… If you'd said straight away, 'Darling, I've won four hundred euros in the lottery,' that would have been different. The way you announced it, I'd already imagined a whole new life. Giving up work, buying a one-way ticket somewhere far, far away, getting a villa by the sea, with a swimming pool…

Franck – If you live by the sea, what do you need a swimming pool for…?

Clara – That's what luxury is, I suppose. Having things you don't really need. Anyway, we don't live by the sea, and we don't have a swimming pool either… That's what you call a lousy life…

Franck – With four hundred euros, we can still treat ourselves to a little extra…

Clara – Yes… We could always buy a book of tickets for the municipal pool. Or even an annual pass for two.

Franck – Sorry, I thought it would cheer you up.

Clara – It has cheered me up! Sorry. I'm rather on edge at the moment… And Jessica's just told me she's lost her dog.

Franck – Maybe she'll find it again.

Clara – I doubt it. She's dead…

Franck – Jessica? She's dead?

Clara – Lola! Jessica's dog! Lola's the one who died!

Franck – Oh, damn! What did she die of? *(Clara is about to answer, but he cuts her off)* Wait, don't tell me. I don't even know why I asked. I couldn't care less. Not today, with four hundred euros falling into our laps…

Clara – So then? What are you going to do with this fortune?

Franck – I don't really know, actually…

Clara – Yes… Four hundred euros… Not even enough for a nose job.

Franck – You don't like my nose? You've never said that before…

Clara – I was talking about mine…

Franck – Your nose is fine. Your mother's got exactly the same one.

Clara – Yes, precisely.

Franck – Why don't you wear something low-cut more often? Like your mother…

Clara – What's that got to do with my nose?

Franck – Nothing. But people would look at your nose less. Men, anyway.

Clara – Thanks… That hadn't occurred to me.

Franck – Four hundred euros… Not really enough to buy anything useful. But not enough for a proper extravagance either…

Clara – We could have dinner at a four-star Michelin restaurant.

Franck – Michelin only goes up to three stars, I think.

Clara – All right, three stars.

Franck – For four hundred euros?

Clara – One star, then.

Franck – Yes, but afterwards we'd have nothing left.

Clara – At least we'd have eaten in a fine restaurant once in our lives. It would be a memory.

Franck – Yeah…

Clara – I bet those restaurants are full of people who've really won the lottery. It must be their staff canteen…

Franck – Or I could put it in my savings account.

Clara – Now there's a reckless adventure. No wonder you work in a bank.

Franck – At the current interest rate… *(He takes out a calculator)* In… six hundred and ninety-four years we'd have half a million euros. Enough to buy a house.

Clara – Or else we go to the casino and put it all on zero.

Franck – Thirty-five to one. *(He taps on the calculator again)* That's fourteen thousand euros.

Clara – Or nothing, if zero doesn't come up the first time.

Franck – You're right, better to spend it. I'll think about it.

Clara – Yes, do that… Meanwhile, I'll put what's left of the ice pops in the freezer.

Franck – You bought ice pops?

Clara – I don't know what came over me. A moment of madness. I wanted to suck on something that would really give me pleasure.

The idea clearly excites him.

Franck – Wonderful… We could do that together…

Clara – Too late, I'm afraid. They melted in my bag…

Blackout.

Scene 2

Franck enters with shopping bags from Galeries Lafayette, the famous Paris department store. He puts them on the side of the stage suggesting the bedroom, returns, removes his jacket and, looking pleased with himself, listens to the answering machine.

Voice-over – Hi, Franck. It's Steven. About Saturday's barbecue… It would suit us better if you came around eight. Jessica doesn't finish at the hair salon until six, so she won't be home before seven. And I have to collect the car from the garage and stop at the supermarket for some spicy merguez sausages. By the time we've lit the barbecue… Anyway, you'll bring dessert, as usual? Great. See you Saturday.

Franck does not look particularly enthusiastic about the invitation. Clara enters, and he brightens.

Franck – Good evening, darling. Did you have a good day?

Clara – A nightmare… Did I tell you Lola is on sick leave?

Franck – I knew dogs could get health insurance these days, but I didn't realise they could take sick leave… Besides, I thought she was dead.

Clara – Lola, my colleague!

Franck – Oh, that Lola… Who had the bright idea of giving dogs women's names? Or women dogs' names… Lola, really… Imagine if I were called Snoopy or Rover.

Clara – Burnout, as they call it now. We used to say nervous breakdown, but 'burnout' must sound more fashionable. Since they won't replace her, I've got to do her work as well as mine. At this rate I'll be suffering from burnout myself. But you seem happy enough. Have you won the lottery again?

Franck – No, but I've figured out what to do with my previous winnings.

Clara – Excellent! I could really use some good news after the day I've had. So?

Franck – Surprise!

Clara – I love surprises…

Franck – I'll be right back…

Clara takes off her coat and sits down, smiling expectantly. Franck returns wearing a bright red dressing gown over his clothes.

Franck – Ta-da!

Clara stares at him, dumbfounded.

Clara – Ta-da what?

Franck – Ta-da…

Clara – Where's the surprise? Apart from that ridiculous bathrobe… Are we going to a spa?

Franck – It's not a bathrobe. It's a dressing gown.

Clara – So what?

Franck – Well, that's the surprise!

Clara – A dressing gown?

Franck – Yeah.

Clara – But a dressing gown… for you or for me?

Franck – For me.

Clara – This is a joke, right?

Franck – No, why?

Clara – A dressing gown? A red dressing gown?

Franck – Why not?

Clara – But nobody wears dressing gowns anymore! Especially not red ones.

Franck – I didn't know what to buy. I decided to treat myself to something beautiful.

Clara – Beautiful?

Franck – I thought it would please you.

Clara – That you should buy yourself a monstrosity like that? It looks as though you've made it out of the curtains of a medieval castle.

Franck – I think it's very stylish.

Clara – But where on earth did you find it?

Franck – Galeries Lafayette.

Clara – You went into Galeries Lafayette and asked for a red dressing gown?

Franck – That's not exactly how it happened. I wanted to treat myself to something original. Something classy. And the sales assistant suggested this.

Clara – She must have been making fun of you. That hideous thing has probably been gathering dust since the last century, and they've finally found a fool to take it off their hands. I bet she'll get a bonus for selling something nobody else would touch. She flirted with you, didn't she?

Franck – She was a rather large lady, not far from retirement.

Clara – That explains it. When she was young, this sort of outfit might still have been fashionable. Now, remind me, Franck. How much did you win in the lottery?

Franck – Four hundred euros.

Clara – And how much did this dressing gown cost you?

Franck – The price was five hundred and fifty, but she agreed to let me have it for four hundred.

Clara – Four hundred euros for a dressing gown? That's daylight robbery!

Franck – It's a designer label… I'm sorry you don't like it. We talked about this. I didn't know what to buy, so I decided to treat myself to something I'd enjoy. Like you with your ice pops…

Clara – The ice pops were on special offer! They cost three euros ninety-nine!

Franck – All that just to let them melt in your bag…

Clara – Did you keep the receipt?

Franck – Yes.

Clara – Give it to me, I'll take this dressing gown back. And that sales assistant will hear from me.

Franck – Take back my dressing gown? No way!

Clara – Franck, you could have bought anything with those four hundred euros. You might even have thought of buying me something. Why a dressing gown?

Franck – I don't know. For once I wanted something completely useless. Something nobody else would ever dream of buying.

Clara – Well, you've achieved that. But you could have bought… a painting, for example. Something to hang on the wall.

Franck – A painting? For four hundred euros?

Clara – By a young artist. At least it might have increased in value.

Franck – And where would we hang it? In this shabby flat, a work of art would look completely out of place, wouldn't it?

Clara – This shabby flat?

Franck – We haven't even repainted the place!

Clara – And whose fault is that?

Franck – Where are we supposed to find the money to redo the paintwork?

Clara – With four hundred euros from the lottery, for example. But seriously, Franck, do you know anyone who still wears a dressing gown?

Franck – Sacha Guitry looked magnificent in a dressing gown.

Clara – Sacha Guitry? Who's that? Do I know him?

Franck – A famous French playwright. Especially between the two world wars.

Clara – Between the wars? That was a century ago! Besides, how do you even know about Sacha Guitry? We never go to the theatre…

Franck – The saleswoman told me Guitry wore almost exactly the same one.

Clara – Almost the same…

Franck – Well, I bought it, I like it and I'm not taking it back!

He sweeps out with theatrical grandeur. Clara stares after him, then takes out her phone and dials a number.

Clara – Jessica? You'll never guess what's just happened to me…

Blackout.

Scene 3

Franck, still draped in his dressing gown, stands centre stage, visibly delighted with himself. He takes a few steps, then lowers himself into an armchair with an extravagant theatrical flourish. He crosses his legs and places both hands flat on the armrests. Clara enters.

Clara – You're already in your dressing gown…?

Franck – Does it bother you?

Clara – I'll try to get used to it. No promises…

Franck – A dressing gown isn't pyjamas or a bathrobe. It's something you wear at home. You can wear it all day.

Clara – All day?

Franck – Only at home, of course. Not outside, obviously.

Clara – What a relief… But by 'at home' you mean when nobody else is here, I hope.

Franck – Sacha Guitry used to receive visitors in his dressing gown.

Clara – Sacha Guitry again! This is becoming an obsession…

Franck – Jean Cocteau and Sigmund Freud wore them too. Back then, a dressing gown was a sign of relaxed elegance.

Clara – And where are you getting all this from?

Franck – ChatGPT… Dressing gowns used to be a privilege of the wealthy and the intellectual elite. Some of the greatest works of literature were written by men wearing them.

Clara – My grandmother wore an old dressing gown, and believe me, she never wrote a thing in her life.

Franck – Perhaps. But when I put on this magnificent dressing gown, I feel like another man. I can't explain it… It inspires me…

Clara – Don't tell me you've decided to start writing as well…?

Franck – And why not?

Clara – Well, yes, why not…

Franck – Meanwhile, I've bought myself a pen.

He takes a fountain pen out of the pocket of his dressing gown.

Clara – A pen…? You mean…

Franck – A fountain pen, yes. A Montblanc.

Clara – A Montblanc? And what on earth is that?

Franck – One of the most prestigious makes of pen in the world! Apparently Hemingway wrote with one. This model is even named after him. You've never heard of Montblanc?

Clara – No. And why did you buy a pen? I mean… a luxury pen?

Franck – To go with the dressing gown!

Clara – Right… And what exactly do you plan to write with it?

Franck – I don't know… I could use it at the bank to fill in deposit slips.

Clara – Don't tell me you're planning to go to work in your dressing gown…

Franck – Of course not! I told you, a dressing gown is indoor wear!

Clara – You're worrying me, Franck…

Franck – Come to think of it, perhaps I should buy a desk as well.

Clara – A desk? Why not… We could go to IKEA on Saturday, if you like.

Franck – IKEA? You must be joking! I mean a proper antique writing desk.

Clara – I see… To go with the dressing gown and the pen…

He takes out a sheet of paper on which he has printed a photograph of the desk.

Franck – Look. I found this one on an antique dealer's website.

Clara – How much?

Franck – More than the pen, anyway. According to the advert, it may once have belonged to the grandfather of Marcel Proust, the French novelist.

Clara – 'May once have belonged'? And that tiny possibility justifies that enormous price?

Franck – What do you think?

Clara – I think that lottery win is beginning to cost us a fortune, Franck. A real fortune…

Blackout.

Scene 4

Still wrapped in his dressing gown, Franck sits behind an antique writing desk with a fountain pen in his hand, wearing the concentrated expression of a writer waiting for inspiration. Clara enters, once again burdened with shopping bags.

Clara – You're home already? Don't you normally finish at six?

Franck – I took the afternoon off.

Clara – Oh, really? I suppose it wasn't to help me carry the shopping…

Franck – More shopping? I don't know how we manage to eat all this. There are only two of us…

Clara – That's probably because not everything's edible. There's shampoo, detergent, toilet paper… Would you like the entire list?

Franck – I'll take your word for it.

Clara – Thanks… And you, did you have a good day?

Franck – I started writing.

Clara – Writing?

Franck – Yes.

Clara – Writing what?

Franck – I don't know yet. But a pen like this makes you want to write, doesn't it?

Clara – Especially with a desk like that… which cost us a fortune and takes up half the room.

Franck – It's true, this room is a little small for a desk like this.

Clara – Or the desk is a little large and ostentatious for a flat in social housing. They even had to take the legs off to get it through the door.

Franck – And don't forget the lift…

Clara – The delivery men had to carry it up the stairs all the way to the eighteenth floor.

Franck – That's why I gave them a little tip.

Clara – It's not every day they have to haul a desk like that to the top floor of a tower block.

Franck – You're right… The more I look at this desk, the more I find it clashes with everything else.

Clara – It's not too late to get rid of it. I could put it up for sale online. A desk that might have belonged to Proust's grandfather ought to fetch a good price. We might even make a profit…

Franck – I was thinking of finding a different flat.

Clara – Moving? With what money? We can barely afford the rent here!

Franck – I don't know, but I feel I'm at a turning point in my life.

Clara – Because you won four hundred euros on the lottery?

Franck – Things are going to change, I'm sure of it.

Clara – So you really think that a dressing gown almost like Sacha Guitry's, a desk that may have belonged to Proust's grandfather and a pen named after Hemingway can turn you into a great writer overnight?

Franck – What's certain is that I'm not going to keep doing sudokus on it.

Clara – You're frightening me, Franck. Perhaps you ought to talk to someone… A doctor, I mean.

Franck – Because I want to change? Because I'm no longer content with our dull, predictable little life?

Clara – Because ever since you put on that dressing gown, you haven't been yourself, Franck! You said it yourself! You feel like another man.

Franck – It was just a figure of speech…

Clara – I hardly recognise you, Franck… You used to be perfectly happy with our little life. I wonder if the dressing gown is under a spell…

Franck – Bewitched?

Clara – Or haunted! If houses can be haunted, why not clothes? Are you sure it didn't really belong to Sacha Guitry?

Franck – Come on… You're the one raving now, darling.

She crosses her forearms towards him, as if warding off an evil spirit.

Clara – Sacha Guitry, come out of that dressing gown!

He stares at her in astonishment.

Blackout.

Scene 5

Franck is still at his desk, but now he is writing. Clara comes home from work carrying a pizza box. Completely absorbed, he does not notice her. She studies him cautiously for a moment. When he finally sees her, he jumps.

Franck – You gave me a fright…

Clara – You looked so focused, I didn't dare disturb you…

Franck – You can say that again… I was so caught up in it that I forgot to have lunch.

Clara – Poor you… Meanwhile, I've been having a wonderful time at the hospital, between my hysterical supervisor and my incontinent patients.

Franck – I didn't even notice you coming in. It was the smell of pizza that caught my attention first.

Clara – How romantic… And I thought you might have missed me…

Franck – When you're really hungry… I wonder why the great fashion designers have never invented a perfume that smells of pizza.

Clara – You certainly don't seem short of inspiration. What are you writing?

Franck – My memoirs.

Clara – Your memoirs? Are you feeling all right?

Franck – I feel perfectly fine, why?

Clara – No, it's just… writing your memoirs?

Franck – I didn't say I was writing my will. Don't worry, I'm not about to die. Writing memoirs doesn't mean you're planning to die soon…

Clara – But people usually write their memoirs towards the end of their lives, don't they? Isn't it a bit early?

Franck – The French writer Chateaubriand started his memoirs at forty. He was only halfway through his life…

Clara – Yes, but you're not Chateaubriand. By forty he'd already had quite an eventful life. What could you possibly have to tell? You've had such a lousy life!

Franck – Thanks for reminding me. But anyone's life can be interesting. It all depends on how you tell the story.

Clara – Even so, there are limits…

Franck – You could at least pretend to encourage me.

Clara – Yes, of course… I can't wait to read it. But am I in it too?

Franck – Not yet… For the moment, I'm writing about my life before I met you.

Clara – The way you say it, that sounds like the most interesting part…

Franck – Our life together is only just beginning, darling.

Clara – If you say so…

She goes out. He sits thinking for a moment, then starts writing again.

Blackout.

Scene 6

Franck sits at his desk, where a pile of books has appeared. He is writing. Clara enters after work. He does not notice her immediately.

Clara – You're coming home earlier and earlier.

Franck – I've taken a week's holiday.

Clara – I didn't know you had that much leave left. Remember we're going to Brittany this summer to stay with my brother…

Franck – No chance of me forgetting, you remind me every day.

Clara – At least we won't have to pay for a holiday rental. Not after you've spent three years' worth of our holiday budget on a luxury dressing gown, a gold-plated pen and an antique desk.

Franck – I paid for the dressing gown with my lottery winnings.

Clara – And now you've taken a week off.

Franck – I need time to write.

Clara – Evenings aren't enough for you anymore?

Franck – In the evenings you're here. I find it hard to concentrate.

Clara – I'm not sure whether to be flattered. Is it the excitement of seeing me again after a whole day apart, or the noise I make washing the dishes and flushing the toilet?

Franck – A bit of both…

Clara – I've even stopped watching television so as not to disturb you.

Franck – That's why I'm thinking of taking a whole year off.

Clara – A year of unpaid leave?

Franck – There's more to life than money.

Clara – No, but money is useful when it comes to paying the rent. Especially if you're planning to move into a bigger flat to match your dressing gown and that desk.

Franck – Do you have another solution?

Clara – You could always write at night.

Franck – Evenings don't suit me, let alone nights. My head is clearest in the morning.

Clara – Clearest? You're thinking of giving up your job to become a writer, when the longest thing I've ever seen you write is a postcard! All because a saleswoman at Galeries Lafayette talked you into buying an absurdly old-fashioned dressing gown. And you call that thinking clearly?

Franck – Why are you making such a fuss? It's not as though I've started taking drugs!

Clara – At this point, I almost wish you had… *(She notices the pile of books)* What are all these books?

Franck – I've started rereading the classics. You ought to try it too, now that you've stopped watching television…

Clara – Rereading? That's a joke! The last book I saw you read was a Tintin comic.

Franck – All right, reading them for the first time… Voltaire, Rousseau, Diderot… The Age of Enlightenment.

Clara – Wake up, Franck! The Enlightenment ended centuries ago!

Franck – What a shame. It was much more interesting than our own age. It even led to the French Revolution.

Clara – Well, take that dressing gown off and get ready. It's Saturday, in case you've forgotten. We're going to Steven and Jessica's barbecue tonight. Jessica is alive and well, after all…

Franck – To be honest, I'd have preferred…

Clara – Sorry?

Franck – No, I mean… I've cancelled.

Clara – What?

Franck – I mean… I've told them we aren't going.

Clara – We? So now you decide for me as well? You might at least have asked! I even bought dessert!

Franck – You said yourself you were tired…

Clara – It's you who's tiring me out, Franck!

Franck – And a barbecue… It's a bit vulgar, isn't it? Can you imagine the philosophers of the Enlightenment gathered around a barbecue, reinventing the world while they wrote the Encyclopaedia? No. They went to literary salons…

Clara – Fine. I'll go to that vulgar barbecue on my own. It'll give me a holiday from you.

Franck – Very well, I'll use the time to write…

Clara – Is that your final word?

Franck – I hate barbecues. Besides, I'm a vegetarian.

Clara – You? A vegetarian? Since when? We had bacon pizza yesterday!

Franck – Oh, bacon hardly counts as meat… And you can make an exception occasionally. But getting together with friends to watch slices of dead animals sizzling over a fire?

Clara – Fine. I'll leave you to write your memoirs of those wonderful years before you ever met me. But one day you'll regret missing that barbecue, Franck. You'll see…

She storms out, furious.

Blackout.

Scene 7

Franck is seated at his desk in his dressing gown, now with a pipe in his mouth. Clara returns from the barbecue, slightly drunk.

Clara – You're smoking a pipe now?

Franck – I thought I'd try it. Perhaps ideas come more easily when I've got something in my mouth.

Clara – Funny… I had the same thought when Steven was driving me home…

Franck – Writers often smoke a pipe. Even women.

Clara – Women?

Franck – George Sand used to smoke a pipe.

Clara – George Sand was a woman?

Franck – Her real name was Aurore Dupin. She was a French novelist.

Clara – You seem to know a lot about women and what they like to put in their mouths. But your pipe isn't even lit.

Franck – I just like having something to chew on. Maybe I should try weed.

Clara – Weed?

Franck – Baudelaire, the poet, smoked hashish. He wrote about it in Artificial Paradises.

Clara – OK…

Franck – It helped him find inspiration. Would Baudelaire have become such a great poet without it?

Clara – Don't tell me you've been smoking weed behind my back!

Franck – You look as though you had more than ice pops to suck on at that barbecue. Am I wrong?

Clara – Maybe… But sucking isn't really cheating, is it?

Franck – I was talking about drinking too much. But if there's something else you'd like to confess…

She looks a little embarrassed.

Clara – They all wanted to know why you weren't there. I didn't know what to tell them.

Franck – To be frank… I don't think the people we spend our time with are helping me grow.

Clara – No kidding…

Franck – They hold me back, if you see what I mean.

Clara – Back from what? Your rise to greatness?

Franck – I feel as though they drag me down.

Clara – No kidding…

Franck – When I'm with them, I catch myself lowering my standards to their level.

Clara – Those friends who are supposedly beneath you are my friends too, Franck. When you insult them, you insult me.

Franck – I wasn't talking about you, darling. In fact, you deserve better too.

Clara – If you keep turning away from your real friends, Franck, you'll end up all alone.

Franck – Sometimes it's better to be alone than in bad company.

Clara – And you expect to write a masterpiece with clichés like that? Perhaps I'm not good enough for you anymore either…

Franck – But really, I never said that…

Clara – Be careful, Franck. If you think your life before me was so exciting, I could give you back your freedom sooner than you expect. I had a life before you, too. Dreams, just like you. I gave them all up, and for what? *(Melodramatically)* You couldn't even give me a child…

She rushes out. He remains, dumbfounded.

Blackout.

Scene 8

Franck is at his desk, with a growing stack of handwritten pages beside him. He is writing. Clara enters, now sober.

Clara – Sorry about last night, I had a bit too much to drink. I was talking nonsense.

Franck – Don't worry, I've already forgotten it. I worked through the night. I think my memoirs are finished… Well, the first volume, anyway…

Clara – So you're going back to work then?

Franck – That depends on how my manuscript is received. If it's a success, I could write volume two…

She picks up the pile of ink-covered pages.

Clara – It really is a manuscript: written by hand. Nobody does that anymore. If you send this to a publisher, they may not bother trying to decipher your hieroglyphics.

Franck – You're right… Perhaps you could type it up?

Clara – Type it up? What century are you living in? Typewriters have practically vanished! And who do you think I am, your secretary?

Franck – Sorry. I'll find someone else.

Clara – Why write it all by hand if you're just going to have someone type it afterwards? Why not write it on a computer in the first place?

Franck – Yes, but a computer…

Clara – A computer wouldn't go with the antique desk and the dressing gown.

Franck – Exactly…

Clara – You really ought to get with the times, Franck… You don't have a mobile phone. *(Pointing to the landline)* You've kept that old telephone from the last century, with its answering machine.

Franck – It's true, I think I was born in the wrong era.

Clara – And what's the right era for you? The interwar years, as you call them?

Franck – Why not? The Roaring Twenties in Paris must have been wonderful.

Clara – Wonderful for rich people like Sacha Guitry, perhaps. But with your luck, you'd have been sent off to fight in both world wars, like my great-grandfather. Assuming you survived the first one…

Franck – I've always dreamed of being a writer, Clara. I found a photo of myself as a little boy, sitting at my father's desk with his pipe in my mouth.

Clara – How symbolic… You should tell a psychologist about that…

He hands her the photo.

Franck – Here, look… It's a photo I've never shown to anyone…

She looks at the photo and seems a little moved. She gives it back to him.

Clara – Dreams are wonderful, but at some point you have to grow up, Franck. Unless you want to end up sleeping under a bridge with a bottle of cheap red wine. That's what I was always taught, anyway…

Franck – I know it's hard for you. But we only get one life. I've spent years behind a bank counter, smiling at customers, making the same gestures and saying the same words, day after day. I'm going to follow my dream, Clara. If I fail, at least I'll have tried.

Clara – Meanwhile, I'll be the one earning the money to pay the rent and put food on the table. And I don't know how long that will be enough. Because it isn't only your dressing gown that's red. Our bank account is in the red too.

Franck – I'm sorry. But for me, this is a question of survival. I had to do something… Something to try and change my life.

Clara – Really? Perhaps you should change your wife as well. Find someone better suited to your new lifestyle.

Pause.

Franck – So… I take it you won't type up the manuscript?

She grabs the manuscript, furious, and storms out.

Blackout.

Scene 9

Franck sits at his desk, unable to work. The telephone rings. He ignores it. The answering machine switches on.

Voice-over – Hi, it's Jessica. I'm calling to see how Franck is. Clara said he had a stomach bug… I hope he's feeling better. And you, Clara, how are you? You had rather a lot of sangria last night, didn't you? You were unstoppable! I've never seen you like that. It's a good thing Steven drove you home; otherwise I'd have been worried. Oh, and you left your handbag in his car, so you'll have to come over and collect it. Shall we do it again next Saturday? With Franck this time. Kisses to you both!

Franck doesn't react at all. Clara returns.

Clara – Are you all right? You look strange…

Franck – No, no, I'm fine… Must be the baby blues…

Clara – The what…?

Franck – You know how people feel after having a baby? When a writer finishes a manuscript, there's a difficult period too. I feel as though I've just given birth.

Clara – A fairly painless birth, though, wasn't it? Sitting there in comfort, wearing that magnificent dressing gown.

Franck – They say the deepest pain is silent.

Clara – I read your manuscript during my lunch break, before typing it.

Franck – And?

Clara – It's full of spelling mistakes…

Franck – Right…

Clara – There's no spellchecker on your Montblanc pen.

Franck – Sorry… But apart from that?

Clara – Apart from that… it's good.

Franck – Do you really think so?

She suddenly seems much more enthusiastic.

Clara – I couldn't stop reading. I didn't even remember to eat lunch.

Franck – You're not just saying that to please me…?

Clara – I had no idea you could write so well.

Franck – Neither did I, honestly…

Clara – You should send it to a publisher.

Franck – Yes… I'm not so sure about that…

Clara – But really… if you wrote all that, it's not just to leave it in a drawer, is it?

Franck – I'm worried it might not be good enough. After all, I'm only a bank clerk.

Clara – A bank clerk who puts on his magic dressing gown and is instantly transformed into a literary genius!

Franck – Don't exaggerate. It has to be believable…

Clara – You're a superhero, Franck! That dressing gown is your Superman costume!

Franck – Do you really think so…?

Clara – I'll type it up. And I'll send it to the biggest publishing houses in Paris.

Blackout.

Scene 10

Franck is at his desk, looking dejected, with a pile of letters in front of him. Clara enters.

Clara – Has the mail come?

Franck – It's here…

Clara – And?

Franck picks up a few letters at random and reads.

Franck – 'Despite your manuscript's many qualities, we regret that it does not fit our publishing programme…' *(He picks another letter)* 'We have read your work with interest, but it does not match the direction of our current list…' There are ten more like this. The rest didn't even bother to reply.

Clara – They haven't even read it…

Franck – How do you know?

Clara – If they had, they'd at least have taken the trouble to send a personalised answer.

Franck – Or perhaps they did read the beginning, decided it wasn't very good and sent a standard rejection letter.

Clara – Apparently, Gallimard, one of France's most prestigious publishers, rejected Marcel Proust's first manuscript.

Franck – In Search of Lost Time… Well, I'll never get back the time I wasted writing this nonsense. And I've wasted yours too…

Clara – Fortunately, Proust didn't give up. He paid to publish his book himself, and it went on to become one of the most famous works in French literature.

Franck – You seem to know a lot about it…

Clara brandishes her mobile phone.

Clara – Wikipedia! And guess who turned down Proust's manuscript at Gallimard?

Franck – No idea…

Clara – André Gide!

Franck – So what?

Clara – So… the greatest geniuses are often misunderstood! Especially at the beginning.

Franck – Or perhaps I'm just an amateur scribbler, and the publishers understood that perfectly well. You were right all along. Who'd want to read the memoirs of a lowly bank clerk?

Clara – You said it yourself: it depends how you tell the story! *(She picks up a book, opens it and reads)* 'For years, I went to bed early. Sometimes, the moment I put out my candle, my eyes would close before I had time even to think: I'm falling asleep…' Is that really more exciting? No wonder Gide fell asleep reading it…

Franck – You're kind to try to cheer me up, Clara, but let's face it. I'll never be Marcel Proust. Any more than you'd become Jimi Hendrix in a few weeks if you took up the guitar.

Blackout.

Scene 11

Franck sits in one of the armchairs. For the first time, he is not wearing his red dressing gown. Clara enters.

Clara – What happened to your dressing gown?

Franck – I've put it up for sale on a second-hand website.

Clara – But… why did you do that?

Franck – That cursed dressing gown nearly ruined us! Not to mention our marriage. You were right. It must have been bewitched.

Clara – I only said that in the heat of the moment…

Franck – I've looked into it. I really was suffering from a kind of madness. Have you heard of the Diderot effect?

Clara – The what?

Franck – Or the Diderot syndrome, if you prefer. The French philosopher described it in an essay published in 1769, 'Regrets on Parting with My Old Dressing Gown'.

Clara – What kind of story is that?

Franck – One day, Diderot was given a magnificent new dressing gown.

Clara – Red, I suppose…

Franck – A luxurious and comfortable garment, but completely out of place in the simple home of a philosopher of the Enlightenment.

Clara – And then?

Franck – He began to feel that his modest furniture wasn't worthy of his splendid new gown. He started buying expensive furniture to match, turned himself into a respectable bourgeois gentleman… and lost his inspiration.

Clara – But that's just the opposite of what happened to you. Diderot lost his calling as a writer after he got his new dressing gown. Yours inspired you to become a writer, even if rather late in life.

Franck – And look where it got me. No publisher wants my book, I've fallen out with all our friends, and we nearly got divorced.

Clara – Don't exaggerate… It was only a quick blowjob in Steven's car, to thank him for bringing me home. And I was completely drunk…

Franck – I'm going to burn my manuscript as well.

Clara – Don't do that, please!

Franck – And why not?

Clara – Because… I hate to admit it, but you were right. We'd got trapped in a routine. Perhaps this crisis has actually done us some good. It might even save our relationship.

Franck – Belated adolescent rebellions don't lead anywhere. It's over. Don't worry. I'll go back to work at the bank on Monday.

Clara – As you wish… Though I'd grown rather fond of the dressing gown too. You look strange without it…

Blackout.

Scene 12

Clara sits at the writing desk. Franck returns with shopping bags. He is wearing one shoe of each colour.

Franck – I stopped off to do the shopping on my way home from work.

Clara – Great…

Franck – Everything all right?

Clara – Yes… And you?

Franck – Fine. Same old routine.

Even though he tries to put on a brave face, he doesn't look completely happy. Clara notices.

Clara – Are you sure you're all right?

Franck – Of course! Why wouldn't I be…?

Clara – Well, for one thing, your shoes aren't the same colour…

Franck – Oh… You're right.

Clara – You went the whole day without noticing?

Franck – Yes…

Clara – And nobody at the office said anything?

Franck – No, but it's true they were giving me odd looks…

Clara – Who knows? Perhaps you'll start a fashion. Since you didn't manage to bring dressing gowns back into fashion…

Franck – I'll put the frozen food away. I bought some ice pops, too. And this time I didn't let them melt. They're still as hard as stone…

Blackout.

Scene 13

Clara is sitting at the desk again, looking at a computer. Franck enters.

Franck – You're getting quite attached to that desk, aren't you? What are you doing?

Clara – I have to confess something, Franck…

Franck – Don't tell me you've decided to start writing too.

Clara – No, don't worry.

Franck – If it's about that little incident with Steven, I've forgotten it. And believe me, I'd rather not hear the details…

Clara – It's not that, Franck. I'm being serious…

Franck – What?

Clara – After every publisher rejected your manuscript, I decided to publish it myself on Amazon.

Franck – And?

Clara – The first week, we sold one copy.

Franck – A mistake, surely. Someone must have clicked the wrong button while ordering.

Clara – The following week, we sold two.

Franck – Probably Jessica and Steven… That swine Steven. He owed me that much…

Clara – Three days ago, we sold twenty-three copies.

Franck – I didn't know we had that many friends…

Clara – Yesterday, we'd sold a hundred and twelve…

Franck – No way?

Clara – And today we've already passed a thousand!

Franck – Then… my book's already a bestseller!

Clara – And you're a successful author!

Franck – Incredible… To think I might never have bought that dressing gown…

Clara – I always believed in you, Franck.

Franck – Thank you, darling. But you know what they say: behind every great man stands a great woman.

Clara – Not so tall that she casts a shadow over him, though.

Franck – I suppose that's why men rarely choose women taller than themselves. Unless the men start wearing high heels themselves…

The phone rings. Clara answers.

Clara – Hello… Yes… Of course… I'll put him on… *(Quietly, to Franck)* Confidential Press. They've noticed how quickly your book is selling on Amazon. They want you to send them the manuscript again…

Franck – Now it really does feel as though we've won the lottery!

Blackout.

Scene 14

Franck and Clara sit in their armchairs, each holding a glass of champagne. The bottle stands in an ice bucket on the writing desk.

Clara – You were right, Franck. This social-housing flat no longer suits our way of life.

Franck – In fact, I wonder if you shouldn't give up your job too.

Clara – Now that you write on a computer, you don't need me to type your manuscripts anymore.

Franck – If I really am a successful author, I'm going to need an agent…

Clara – I've got another idea…

Franck – Anyway, I'll need to find a subject for my next book. That won't be easy…

Clara – Particularly since you did things the wrong way round.

Franck – Backwards?

Clara – You started with your memoirs…

Franck – I can't spend my whole life just telling my own story, that's for sure.

Clara – Yeah… You'll need to start taking an interest in other people's lives too.

Franck – Other people? You mean… Steven and Jessica, for example?

Clara – Why not?

Franck – They're quite a pair of characters, I'll give them that.

Clara – A barbecue could make a good play.

Franck – A bedroom farce or a tragedy?

Clara – Depends how it ends, doesn't it…?

Franck – Ever since I got rid of my dressing gown, I've lost my inspiration.

Clara – Don't worry… I've got a surprise for you…

She goes out and returns with the red dressing gown.

Franck – You bought another one? The saleswoman told me hers was the last!

Clara – It's your old one. I bought it back from the second-hand website.

Franck – I wondered how I'd managed to find a fool to buy it. Even at half price. So it was you!

Clara – If it really was thanks to this dressing gown that you wrote your first bestseller…

Franck – By the way, how are sales going?

Clara – Unfortunately, sales fell to twelve copies yesterday.

Franck – Oh, damn…

Clara – Perhaps it's only a temporary dip…

Franck – Or they've realised I'm a fraud…

Clara – The title may have been a little misleading.

Franck – Diderot's Dressing Gown.

Clara – Perhaps buyers thought it was a newly discovered work by Diderot called The Dressing Gown.

Franck – Yes, maybe we got a bit carried away…

Clara – Good thing we haven't given up the flat yet.

Franck – And that you haven't resigned from the hospital.

Clara – I resigned yesterday. But never mind. I've already found a job at a private clinic, on twice the salary!

Franck – Then I don't have to go back to work!

Clara – Maybe part-time…

The phone rings. Franck answers.

Franck – Hello…? Oh, hi Jessica… Yes… No… Right… Yes, I'll tell her… No, no… Goodbye, Jessica…

Clara – Was that Jessica?

Franck – She found a bra under the back seat while vacuuming Steven's car.

Clara – Oh, really…?

Franck – She was wondering if it was yours…

Blackout.

Scene 15

Franck is at his desk, writing. He is wearing his red dressing gown again. Clara enters with a broad smile.

Clara – You've started writing again…

Franck – In a manner of speaking…

Clara – Have you found a new idea for your next novel?

Franck – I'm doing a crossword…

Clara – Ah… Back to where you started, then.

Franck – Before, I did Sudoku puzzles…

Clara – From Sudoku to crosswords? You really have made progress.

Franck – I used to be a man of numbers. Now I'm a man of letters. And you? You seem very cheerful. Are my book sales picking up?

Clara – No, but I've played the lottery too!

Franck – And?

Clara – I won!

Franck – The jackpot?

Clara – Two euros.

Franck – That's what the ticket cost!

Clara – I chose to see it as a sign of destiny. So I decided to buy myself a little present too.

Franck – More ice pops? I hope they didn't melt over your knees this time…

Clara – No, not ice pops…

Franck – Oh, no? What then?

Clara – Surprise!

She leaves and returns carrying a guitar case.

Franck – What on earth is that?

Clara – You'll never guess…

Franck – A machine gun?

She opens the case and takes out an electric guitar.

Clara – A guitar!

Franck – I didn't know you played the guitar…

Clara – I don't… Not yet. But I've always dreamed of playing.

Franck – Really? You never told me that.

Clara – I've got dreams I've never told you about, you know…

Franck – The beginning of a great career for you as well, then…?

She begins to strum wildly. On the soundtrack, a few horribly wrong notes give way to a dazzling electric-guitar solo in the style of Jimi Hendrix. Franck stares at her, astonished.

Blackout.

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
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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