La Comédiathèque

Blackouts



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Blackouts

A sketch comedy by

Jean-Pierre Martinez

Translated by the author

Like black holes, lapses in memory open onto unknown parallel universes...

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Cast

For one or more pairs of performers

(Some sketches can be performed by actors of any gender.)

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1. Vaguely

They are standing side by side, exchanging a tender look.

Man – Are you all right?

Woman – Yes... And you?

Man – I'm all right. *(Pause)* We're dead, aren't we?

Woman – Why do you say that?

Man – I don't know... The last thing I remember is a thirty-metre-high wave about to crash over the swimming pool where we'd just stretched out for a nap.

Woman – Oh yes...

Man – You remember it too?

Woman – I do.

Man – So we must be dead.

Woman – Unless the wave carried us miles away and gently put us down, without waking us, beside another hotel's pool...

Man – Another hotel that also happens to be called Paradise Hotel.

Woman – Without a scratch. Not even a drop of water on us.

Man – That doesn't seem very likely, does it?

Woman – So we're dead.

Man – Well... dead...

Woman – You're right. I can't really tell the difference from when we were alive.

Man – Except that in this world, we don't seem to be married yet.

Woman – Why do you say that?

Man – We're not wearing wedding rings.

Woman – You don't think we've had children yet either?

Man – I don't see their towels by the pool.

Woman – Nor their floaties.

A pause.

Man – Maybe we haven't even met yet...

Woman – You mean... we don't know each other?

Man – I'm not sure. Do we?

Woman – I don't think so.

A pause.

Man – So this is what death is.

Woman – A parallel world where the hour of our death hasn't struck.

Man – A paradise the tsunami never reached.

Woman – And yet... we both saw that wave.

Man – Yes.

Woman – If that's how this works, we're not supposed to remember anything from our past lives. Do you remember?

Man – Vaguely.

Woman – Same here. I remember the wave... you... and the children. Mostly the children, to be honest. And you?

Man – Mostly the wave.

Woman – It's strange.

Man – There must be a glitch in the system. We're not meant to remember.

Woman – Otherwise people would realise they're already dead.

Man – Should we tell them?

Woman – Tell who what?

Man – Tell them they're dead.

She looks out at the audience.

Woman – Look at them... They seem happy. They wouldn't believe us.

Man – They'd think we were mad. Lock us away.

Woman – No. Let's keep it to ourselves.

Man – You're right.

Woman – Our secret.

A pause.

Man – Shall we?

Woman – Shall we what?

Man – Go and see what's different in this world… this world where the tsunami never hit the Paradise Hotel.

Woman – And where we haven't met yet.

Man – I'd like to know what happens.

Woman – Yes... Even if it's a little frightening.

Man – First we'll need to find out which room we're in.

Woman – Since we didn't know each other, we probably weren't in the same room.

Man – Let's ask at reception.

Woman – Let's do that.

Man – Come on.

They begin to walk off.

Woman – It was such a lovely day, though, wasn't it?

Man – It was.

Woman – Who could possibly have guessed...

Man – That we'd meet today.

They exit.

Blackout.

2. The Comma

They are holding each other tenderly. They let go, still smiling blissfully.

Man – We're living together, aren't we?

Woman – Yes... *(A pause.)* But do you mean, 'We're living together' or 'We're living, together'?

Man – Erm... What's the difference?

Woman – The comma.

Man – The comma?

Woman – Without the comma, we share a home. With the comma, we're simply two people who happen to be alive at the same time.

Man – Oh. Right.

Woman – Quite a difference, isn't it?

A moment of unease. They embrace again for reassurance, then let go, smiling blissfully once more.

Man – Do you remember how we met?

Woman – Yes... *(Pause)* Actually... no. Do you?

Man – No, me neither. I thought you'd know...

Woman – Where could we have met, do you think?

Man – If we're together, we must've met somewhere.

Woman – Obviously...

Man – But where?

Woman – I don't know... Where do people usually meet? You know, a man and a woman.

Man – At a friend's house?

Woman – Do we have any mutual friends?

He checks his phone.

Man – Not according to my phone.

Woman – Apparently, one in four couples meet at work.

Man – Where do you work?

Woman – I'm... a stripper. I think. And you?

Man – Plumber.

Woman – Plumber?

Man – Have they had the plumbing done recently at your strip club?

Woman – Oh, I don't work in a club. It's just a hobby. Something I do at home...

Man – I see...

Woman – And you?

Man – No, no, I'm a professional plumber. I mean, I do it in other people's homes. I think...

Woman – Got it.

Man – So... have you had a plumber over recently?

Woman – No... But I do remember having a leak recently.

Man – A leak? Someone giving away your secrets?

Woman – No. A water leak. A pipe.

Man – Oh, of course. A pipe. Right... Well, maybe I'd better get going...

Woman – Go? Where to?

Man – I... I don't know... Home?

Woman – You don't live here?

Man – Do you think I live here?

Woman – I'm not sure. Do you live somewhere else?

Man – I... can't really remember. Are you sure you live here?

She looks around.

Woman – Doesn't look familiar.

He picks up a cardboard sign from the floor.

Man – Look...

Woman – What is it?

Man – A sign.

Woman – What does it say?

Man – 'Do Not Disturb'.

Woman – And the other side?

Man – 'Please Make Up the Room'.

Woman – Oh, right.

She starts to move as though she has a job to do.

Man – What are you doing?

Woman – I'm going to make up the room. Isn't that what you just told me?

Man – Well... yes, but... That's what the sign says.

Woman – This is all very strange.

Man – Yeah... Maybe we should just go back to bed.

Woman – Back to bed? You mean... together?

Man – I... don't know... Should we?

Woman – Yes, yes...

Man – Maybe we'll understand things better when we wake up.

Woman – I hope so...

Man – I'll put the 'Do Not Disturb' sign on the door.

Woman – Yes, I think that's safest.

Blackout.

3. Antipathy

They are standing on opposite sides of the stage. They exchange furtive glances. He finally walks over to her.

Man – Excuse me. I've been looking at you for a while, and... Please don't think this is a dreadful attempt to chat you up. Believe me, you're not my type at all...

Woman – Thanks...

Man – No, what I mean is... It's strange, but I feel like I've seen you before. Not just in passing. Like I know you.

Woman – Oh really...?

Man – Sorry, I must sound completely ridiculous...

Woman – No, not at all... Well, yes, you do sound ridiculous, but... I also feel as if I know you. Rather well, in fact.

Man – Really? So I'm not losing my mind.

Woman – That depends.

Man – Depends?

Woman – Maybe we met in a psychiatric ward. Would explain why we've blocked it out...

Man – Right... So you too...

Woman – Exactly. Your face looks familiar, but I couldn't say why.

They look at each other for a moment.

Man – What's odd is... you look so familiar. I'm sorry, this might sound awkward, but... You wouldn't happen to be one of my exes?

Woman – Wow... As pick-up lines go, that's a new one. But given I'm clearly not your type... Seems unlikely.

Man – Could explain why it didn't last. Sorry, I'm being...

Woman – Don't be. For what it's worth, you're not my type either.

Man – That's a relief.

Woman – No offence, but... I really can't stand the sight of you.

Man – Well... the feeling's mutual...

Woman – I don't just mean I can't put a name to your face. I mean I can't stand the face itself.

Man – It's funny you should say that. I've been trying to find a polite way of putting it, but... I find you absolutely unbearable too.

Woman – Well, at least we've got that in common.

Man – Yes... But it still doesn't explain how we know each other, or where we might've met.

Woman – Mind you, considering the tone we've already set... and the depth you've just dug yourself into... I'm not sure it's worth digging any further.

Man – You're right... Best leave it there. Imagine if it all came flooding back and...

Woman – Yes, that would really be...

Man – Some things are better left forgotten.

Woman – Absolutely... Imagine if I suddenly remembered that... *(She gives him a strange look.)* Wait a minute... It's coming back now...

Man – No...? What?

Woman *(outraged)* – You really don't remember?

Man – Er... no, but... have we suddenly become old friends?

She glares at him, a hateful grin spreading across her face.

Woman – You bastard!

Man – Was it that bad?

Woman – And you've got the nerve to ask me that?!

Man – I'm sorry, I... I honestly don't remember...

Woman – You don't remember me? After what you did to me?!

Man – I don't know what to say... I can't imagine myself hurting anyone. Especially not a woman. But I have to admit, I find you so irritating that under exceptional circumstances, perhaps I could have...

Woman – You piece of filth... So you're not even going to deny it?

Man – I am! I mean... no... Please, just tell me! I need to know now. Whatever it is, I'm ready.

She steps toward him, threatening.

Woman – I don't know what's stopping me from...

Man – No, go ahead... If you think I deserve it...

Suddenly, she adopts a detached tone, a slight smile on her lips.

Woman – Relax. I'm joking. I don't remember a thing.

Man – Oh right...

Woman – Still, I suspect I could have murdered you in a previous life. You've got the sort of face people want to slap. Has no one ever told you?

Man – Not quite so bluntly, no...

Woman – Honestly, I'm surprised.

Man – Yes... I think we'd better leave it there, don't you?

Woman – Sounds wise.

Man – Well then... Goodbye.

Woman – Goodbye?

Man – I mean, who knows, maybe we'll bump into each other again.

Woman – At least if we do, we'll know why we feel like we've met before.

Man – Exactly... *(She's about to go.)* No, but you don't have to leave...

Woman – I was leaving anyway.

Man – I was just going too.

Woman – Well... let's go then.

Man – OK. I was heading that way. You too?

Woman – Yes...

Man – Let's walk a bit together. Maybe it'll come back to us.

Woman – Unless we kill each other first...

Man – That's always a possibility... I'm liking you less and less by the second.

Woman – The feeling's mutual.

They walk off.

Blackout.

4. Optical Illusion

Standing facing the audience, they look through a window towards the building opposite.

Man – Nice day, isn't it?

Woman – Bit windy though.

Man – Yes. The wind must have blown the clouds away...

Pause.

Woman – Do you see that window over there?

Man – Which window?

Woman – Just behind that tree. Half-hidden by the leaves.

Man – Oh yes, that one... Funny. I've never seen a light on there, not even at night.

Woman – I wonder who lives there.

Man – Maybe no one. Could be empty.

Woman – Maybe... But during the day, I sometimes see shapes through the glass. Through these branches.

Man – Really?

Woman – A man and a woman, I think.

Man – This is beginning to sound like a thriller...

Woman – A thriller?

Man – Don't tell me you think that man has murdered his wife...

Woman – No... but I've got a weird feeling about that place.

Man – Don't you have anything better to do than spy on the neighbours?

She smiles, then stares again, more intently.

Woman – Wait a second... That's bizarre. It looks like...

Man – What?

Woman – There's a terrible wind today, and the leaves aren't moving at all.

He looks, puzzled.

Man – You're right... That's odd.

Woman – You'll laugh, but...

Man – Try me.

Woman – That tree... it's painted on the wall.

Man – Painted?

Woman – I'm serious. Look closely. It's a mural.

He leans in, more focused.

Man – You're right. I'd never noticed it before.

Woman – I had a feeling something was off...

Man – But then... if the tree is painted, so must the window be.

Woman – You think?

Man – How could a painted tree hide a real window?

Woman – True, that wouldn't make sense.

Woman – If the tree is painted on the wall, the window must be painted on it too.

Man – A tree that doesn't exist... hiding a window that doesn't exist either.

Woman – That's why the illusion works so well. We assume that if something is hidden, it must be real. Why hide something that isn't even there?

Man – Rather like God. People believe in him all the more because they never see him.

Woman – If God wandered around supermarkets in a fake beard and a shabby costume, like Santa Claus at holiday time, people would soon stop believing.

Man – Quite right...

Pause.

Woman – What if we're illusions too?

Man – What?

Woman – Maybe the people watching us think we're illusions. Pictures, or photographs of ourselves.

Man – But we're here, we move, we talk.

Woman – So do videos.

Man – We're in 3D.

Woman – So are holograms. Perhaps we're three-dimensional optical illusions.

Man – We should ask the neighbours opposite.

Woman – Then again, how much can you trust the neighbours... if they're illusions too?

Man – I think we're losing our minds.

Woman – You're right. I'll close the window.

She hesitates.

Man – Don't tell me it's painted on the wall too...

They share an uneasy look.

Blackout.

5. Black and White

She is already there. He enters, carrying a large notebook.

Woman – Hello, hello... Come in, come in...

Man – Thank you, thank you...

Woman – You didn't have too much trouble getting here, I hope? With all the traffic...

Man – I live just across the street.

Woman – Across the street? You mean...

Man – The building opposite.

Woman – Oh, I see... How strange. I was convinced that window on the opposite wall was just painted on.

Man – Painted on?

Woman – Yes, that it was just part of a mural. I've never seen anything moving behind it.

Man – And yet here I am.

Woman – Quite. So from your living room, you can see everything that goes on in here.

Man – Absolutely everything.

She laughs nervously, as if to reassure herself.

Woman – Mind you... What could possibly happen in a literary agent's office that's worth spying on?

Man – That's for you to tell me.

Woman – Of course, of course... So, how's the new novel coming along?

Man – I'm nearly finished.

Woman – Good, good... I hope it's original. There are so many new novels coming out these days. So many people writing about their own little lives and their own little troubles, convinced the whole world is desperate to read them.

Man – Don't worry, it's not about my own life.

Woman – Thank goodness. What we need is a writer with a genuinely new idea. Someone who's prepared to tear up the rules of the novel.

Man – Well, you may want to tear up my manuscript when you see it.

Woman – Wonderful! That's the spirit! Smash the old forms! Forget tradition, forget conventions. Literature needs a revolution!

Man – Funny you should mention a revolution... You'll understand when you see the manuscript.

Woman – Now you've got me interested, my friend. I can't wait to see it. Have you brought a few pages?

Man – I'm nearly finished. Here, take a look…

He hands her the large notebook.

Woman – Good, good... It's certainly heavy. Not too long, I hope? Anything over two hundred pages is a challenge these days. People are used to messages, not novels. They've almost forgotten how to turn a page.

She puts on her reading glasses.

Man – About nine hundred pages. But you'll find it's a very easy read.

Woman – Fine, fine... And what's the title?

Man – Black and White.

Woman – Black and White... Is it about chess?

Man – Not at all. It's inspired by abstract painting. That's what I meant earlier when I said...

Woman – Abstract painting? How interesting. I love abstract painting.

Man – I nearly called it Beyond Black.

Woman – Very ambitious. But are you sure you can revolutionise the novel by borrowing ideas from painting?

Man – Just wait. I think you'll be surprised.

Woman – All right, all right... Let's have a look.

She opens the notebook and starts turning the pages.

Man – I'll let you take a moment to get a feel for it...

Woman – Yes... but tell me. You seem to have left a few blank pages at the beginning. When does it actually start?

Man – It already has.

Woman – I beg your pardon?

Man – The blank pages are the beginning.

Woman – I'm not sure I follow...

Man – I warned you it might surprise you. I've calculated that on the average page of a novel, the black printed letters cover about eight percent of the white paper.

Woman – Eight percent?

Man – On average. It depends on the font, of course. With a bold typeface, it can go up to nine or even ten percent.

Woman – Really...? And so...?

Man – So I had the idea of separating the white from the black.

Woman – How fascinating.

Man – Then I wondered whether I should start with the white and end with the black, or the other way around...

Woman – Right...

Man – In the end, I chose to begin with the white... to build a sense of anticipation in the reader, you see?

Woman – I see, I see...

Man – A kind of suspense, if you like.

Woman – I'm not sure what I'd prefer... *(Turning the pages.)* So every page is blank?

Man – Not at all. And that's where it gets interesting. For simplicity's sake, I went with an even ten percent. So after every nine white pages, there's one black page.

Woman – Black?

Man – Completely black.

Woman – Why black?

Man – I knew that would throw you a bit. But that's what you wanted, isn't it? Something new?

Woman – Yes, well...

Man – That black page contains all the ink that would normally have been used on the previous nine pages. Except that in my novel, those nine pages remain completely blank. Do you see?

Woman – I follow, I follow...

Man – I can see it's left you a bit perplexed. That's normal. All innovation is unsettling at first. So if you'll allow me, I'll give you a metaphor to help you grasp the revolutionary nature of this work.

Woman – A metaphor?

Man – A novel is like an omelette. You can add onions, potatoes, cheese, whatever you like, but it's still an omelette. My approach is much more radical. I go back to basics. I separate the whites from the yolks. Or, in this case, the white from the black. Hence the title...

Woman – You're joking, aren't you?

Man – I knew you'd say that. But how is it any more absurd than an artist selling an entirely white or black canvas and calling it a 'monochrome'?

Woman – Of course...

Man – This is the beginning of a whole new literary movement. Later, I may write more novels in which the white isn't quite so white and the black isn't quite so black. But the sacred ten-percent ratio must remain unchanged!

Woman – Ten percent.

Man – Painters have the golden ratio. Why shouldn't writers have one too? And ten percent really is a sacred number: it's the commission you take from all my royalties!

Woman – And you seriously expect me to pay you an advance for this nonsense?

Man – As I said, I live across the street... and from my home I can see everything that happens in this office.

Woman – Everything?

Man – Everything. I even have video...

Woman – I see... So how much would it cost me to make you forget what you've seen?

Blackout.

6. Back to the Future

She is already there, wearing a white lab coat. He enters, dressed in everyday clothes.

Woman – Good morning, sir. Thank you for agreeing to take part in our experiment. As you know, this research programme is strictly confidential. In fact, it's classified as top secret.

Man – I assure you, I didn't accept because of the generous payment you're offering volunteers. I did it out of a sense of duty. I'm a practising Catholic and a member of a moderate trade union. If my humble contribution can help cure humanity of one of its many ills...

Woman – Yes... Which brings me to the real purpose of our research. We chose not to reveal it before selecting our volunteers. But now that you're part of the project, we owe you an explanation. The programme is called 'Back to the Future'.

Man – Back to the Future?

Woman – You'll soon understand why.

Man – But this is a drug trial, isn't it?

Woman – Well... not exactly.

Man – You've piqued my curiosity, Doctor.

Woman – To be precise, sir, it's your sperm we're interested in.

Man – You've gone from intriguing me to frightening me.

Woman – Earlier, you mentioned the many afflictions that still plague Humanity.

Man – I was thinking of diseases. Epidemics, for instance...

Woman – Very real threats, of course, and ones that medicine is still fighting with varying degrees of success.

Man – But...?

Woman – But let's be frank. Are those really the things that threaten the existence of humanity itself?

Man – No, probably not.

Woman – So, in your view, what is the danger driving our planet towards collapse?

Man – I... I'm not sure...

Woman – The real scourge, sir, is humanity.

Man – Humanity?

Woman – Men and women alike. The entire human species.

Man – Ah, yes...

Woman – Overpopulation, deforestation, resource depletion, global warming, nuclear war...

Man – Certainly... but what does my sperm have to do with fixing all that?

Woman – Sir, the situation, as we understand it with the tools at our disposal, is even more desperate than you can imagine.

Man – Really...?

Woman – And from that grim assessment, we reached the only viable solution to avoid total catastrophe, in other words, the end of the world.

Man – I'm listening...

Woman – When you think of all the horrors human beings are capable of, have you never wondered when it all started to go wrong?

Man – Yes, well... And what's your answer?

Woman – The answer is obvious: when the ape became human.

Man – I see...

Woman – Or, in your religious terms, when God created humanity.

Man – Are you saying God made a mistake?

Woman – Just look at the results. It was a ticking time bomb.

Man – Right... And what exactly are you proposing?

Woman – At first we considered creating a superior human. But that's been tried before, with disastrous results. With ordinary humans we're heading for disaster. With superhumans we'd get there even faster.

Man – Oh, I see...

Woman – So the answer isn't to move forward. It's to go into reverse.

Man – Reverse?

Woman – Some of the world's leading scientists, social researchers and philosophers met secretly under the auspices of an international organisation. They reached a unanimous conclusion: the only long-term way to save the planet is to turn human beings back into apes.

Man – Back? What do you mean, “back”?

Woman – Not overnight, of course. But by gradually modifying the genetic traits of our descendants, through guided natural selection. And that's where you come in.

Man – Me?

Woman – Or at least... your sperm.

Man – You'll have to explain...

Woman – According to our research, practising Catholics are genetically closer to apes than any other group we've studied.

Man – Really?

Woman – The same tendency applies to religious believers in general. But when we approached extremists from some other faiths, they refused to cooperate...

Man – I see...

Woman – And we certainly don't want our new primates to inherit the genes of religious fanatics alone. Some apes can be terribly aggressive, you know...

Man – Quite right...

Woman – That's why we made a further selection among the practising Catholics.

Man – And why me, specifically?

Woman – That's where your trade-union membership works in your favour. A moderate, cooperative union, of course. According to our figures, practising Catholics who also belong to such a union are the least aggressive and most willing to cooperate.

Man – I see.

Woman – Now that you know everything, let me ask you formally: are you prepared to donate your sperm to help save the human race by returning it to the stage of the ape?

Man – I must admit... I wasn't expecting that.

Woman – Now you understand why we call this last-chance mission 'Back to the Future'. If we give evolution a second chance, perhaps humanity will take a more sensible path next time.

Man – I'm honoured by your trust, and I'm aware of the responsibility. So yes. I confirm my willingness to take part in this operation to save Humanity.

Woman – Thank you, sir. Given what we know about you, I'm not surprised by your response. I'll be in touch shortly to begin the procedure.

Man – I'm entirely at your disposal.

Woman – Thanks to you, in two or three generations, human beings will have forgotten they were ever human.

He exits. She takes out her phone and dials.

Woman – You won't believe this, but he agreed...

Blackout.

7. Confession

He is seated, facing the audience. She enters and sits beside him, also facing the audience.

Man – I'm listening, my child...

Woman – It's not easy, Father.

Man – Through me, you confess your sins to our Lord. Remember, a sin confessed is halfway to being forgiven. And if you sincerely repent, whatever you've done, you'll be absolved.

Woman – The thing is... I'm not sure this is really a sin.

Man – If you believe you've committed no sin, why come to confession? But you know, we all sin, alas.

Woman – Even you?

Man – Of course. Even me. I am but a man.

Woman – So who do you confess to? I've always wondered. Like with hairdressers, who cuts their hair? Or doctors. You don't imagine a doctor falling ill. And yet... they're only human too...

Man – I believe we're straying from the point, my child. How long has it been since your last confession?

Woman – I've never confessed.

Man – In that case, how can you claim to have never sinned? Even if you were a Saint...

Woman – I'm no saint. But what I have to tell you is extraordinary.

Man – Well... If it helps you, I'm listening. And together we'll see whether or not it's a sin.

Woman – Well, Father... I believe I've discovered the secret of the universe.

Man – The mystery of...? If this is some sort of joke, let me remind you that mocking the sacrament of confession is, in itself, a sin.

Woman – I knew you'd think I was mad... That's why I came to you. If you won't listen to me, who will?

Man – All right then. I'm listening...

Woman – Well, Doctor...

Man – Father.

Woman – Sorry... Well then, Father, I think I've understood how the whole thing works. And, more importantly, why.

Man – The whole thing?

Woman – The world! Life, death, good, evil...

Man – Nothing too ambitious, then?

Woman – The universe, the galaxies, black holes, alien life...

Man – I see... And how exactly have you come by such universal insight? You're a scientist, I presume? If so, let's be clear: my field is doubt, faith, and belief. Not certainty, truth, or knowledge.

Woman – That's the surprising bit. I'm absolutely not a scientist. I've always been rubbish at maths, actually. But ever since I was a little girl, I've asked myself questions about all this. Haven't you?

Man – I have... In my own way.

Woman – And in your own way, you believe you've found the truth.

Man – Let's focus on what brings you here today...

Woman – Of course. I quickly realised I'd never find the answers to questions that humans have been asking for thousands of years, without any luck.

Man – And...?

Woman – And yet, just when I'd given up... last night, everything became clear.

Man – Really?

Woman – I was fast asleep. I woke up in a sweat. And the answer came to me in a flash.

Man – Don't tell me you've had a miraculous vision. Seen the Virgin Mary, perhaps?

Woman – No, of course not. And as for the secret of the universe... Let's just say God doesn't really have much to do with it. That's partly why I came to you first. So you could, you know... pass it on to your boss.

Man – Very considerate of you. But out of curiosity, could you give me some idea of what you think you've discovered?

Woman – You'll see. It's so simple...

Man – As simple as the Bible?

Woman – I was expecting something impossibly complicated. After all, scientists on one side and philosophers on the other have never come close to even a hint of an answer.

Man – And...?

Woman – Well... no. It's very simple. Though obviously quite astonishing. Otherwise, someone else would've figured it out before me...

Man – I must admit: you've piqued my curiosity. I'm listening...

Woman – It came to me in a dream, so I wrote it down immediately. Simple or not, you know how dreams are. They're gone the moment you wake up.

Man – Then please don't keep me waiting. Especially since I have other parishioners waiting for confession after you...

Woman – Right. Well then...

Man – Yes?

Woman – Hang on, I'll tell you right now...

Man – I'm waiting.

She rummages in her bag, but can't find the paper.

Woman – Oh, damn it!

Man – What now?

Woman – I've no idea what I've done with it. I was sure I'd put it in my bag...

Man – But surely you remember the gist of it?

Woman – I'm telling you, it's like a dream. So clear while you're asleep. So obvious. But...

Man – Yes...?

Woman – Oh, it's no good... It's on the tip of my tongue...

Man – I see...

Woman – No, this is ridiculous... The secret of the universe! I had it, and now... it's gone.

Man – Really?

Woman – No, wait, it'll come back to me... It had something to do with... Oh hell, I've no idea...

Man – Well then. Have you anything else to confess?

Woman – No...

Man – In that case, I must ask you to leave. There are others in greater need of spiritual comfort.

Woman – Of course. Forgive me. But I'll think it over, and if it comes back to me...

Man – Yes. Think it over, and come back if it does.

Woman – Thank you. How much do I owe you, Doctor?

Man – You may leave an offering in the box on your way out.

Woman – I'm sure it'll come back to me... And perhaps I'll find that wretched piece of paper. It's not exactly as long as the Bible. The whole thing fitted into one sentence.

Man – One sentence?

Woman – Unfortunately, that's the sentence I've forgotten...

Blackout.

8. A Tribute

They stand side by side facing the audience, he slightly in front, she just behind. Both wear strained smiles and appropriately solemn expressions. He clears his throat and takes a paper from his pocket, glancing at it now and then.

Man – Dear friends, dear colleagues... We are gathered today to honour the memory of John, who sadly left us quite suddenly a few days ago. To us, John was far more than a colleague. He was a friend, almost a member of the family... John was a man...

She tries to attract his attention by coughing discreetly. When he fails to understand, she whispers something in his ear.

Man – Forgive me for getting the name of our dear departed wrong. The emotion, no doubt... Jim was a man... discreet, but valued by everyone. Throughout his distinguished career in the Roads Department... *(She gives him an embarrassed look and coughs. He checks his notes and corrects himself.)* Throughout his career in the Records Department, I should say, he worked tirelessly for the good of his fellow citizens. James never drew attention to himself through bad behaviour, an angry outburst or even a raised voice. No, Jack was not a man who liked being in the spotlight. He would always let someone in a hurry go ahead of him in the canteen queue. He was always willing to cover for a sick colleague, and to take his holidays in the least popular weeks of the year so that others could spend time with their families. Yes, more than simply discreet, you could say that Jason had already chosen, while he was alive, to make himself almost invisible. But only so that those he loved could shine. Yes, Jeremy, considering how little space you occupied in this world, your death will certainly leave a huge empty space behind you. On the very eve of retirement, you have left us as you lived: without wishing to cause any trouble. At least you died peacefully. Your heart gave out, probably because it was too big... *(She whispers in his ear again.)* Your heart... and, I'm now told, the tram that ran you over as you stepped out of your home. That same tram was supposed to bring you here for what should have been your last day at work. Instead, it took you straight to the end of the line. But you leave this world surrounded by the love of those closest to you, above all your devoted wife... *(She signals to him and he corrects himself.)* The wife from whom, sadly, you were divorced many years ago. People say death is hardest for those left behind. Fortunately, you leave neither a widow nor any children. But your family still mourns you, Jacob. Because we were your family. Thank you all for coming to pay one final tribute to our deeply regretted Joseph. May he rest in peace. And after this final journey, may he enjoy an eternal retirement he has truly earned — one which, at least, will cost the pension fund nothing at all. Farewell, Jeffrey. Your colleagues will never forget you...

The imaginary audience begins to disperse. They are left alone.

Man *(putting away his notes)* – What a nightmare! Who wrote this rubbish? Was it you?

Woman – Your deputy. I don't think he knew the deceased particularly well.

Man – Neither did I... Did you know him?

Woman – Not personally. He was terribly discreet.

Man – Are we even sure he's dead?

Woman – Oh yes, I think so... I'll check.

Blackout.

9. The PIN

They are standing side by side, facing the audience.

Man – Well?

Woman – No, I really can't remember...

Man – Are you sure you didn't write it down somewhere?

Woman – I did! Yes, of course I wrote it down somewhere.

Man – So...?

Woman – The problem is, I can't remember where I wrote it down.

Man – Right...

Woman – The whole point of a secret code is that you don't write it in huge letters on the fridge... or on your suitcase when you go on holiday.

Man – The point is mostly to remember where you hid them.

Woman – Well, I must have hidden it very carefully, because now even I can't find it.

Man – And you can't remember your PIN at all?

Woman – Not for certain. You only get three attempts, and I've already used two.

Man – It's like the genie in the bottle. You only get three wishes.

Woman – I'm trying to remember... There are just so many passwords these days.

Man – I use the same password whenever I can. That way I won't forget it.

Woman – And that way, if someone hacks you, they can access everything.

Man – But at least I can access my account!

Woman – Well go on then, access your account!

Man – I lost my bank card. You know that.

Woman – You remember your PIN but lost your card. I still have my card but forgot the code.

Man – Wasn't it your date of birth?

Woman – I never tell anyone my date of birth. Not even my bank.

Man – The last four digits of your phone number?

Woman – I like to choose passwords that are a bit harder to hack, thank you.

Man – Including by you...

Woman – I have a feeling I didn't choose a completely random string of numbers this time, like I do for the lottery.

Man – And you don't remember the winning numbers?

Woman – We have one attempt left. If we get it wrong, the machine swallows the card and we'll starve.

Man – Along with everyone else in this miserable place. Why on earth did we come here for our holiday?

Woman – Your idea, remember. I wanted to go somewhere closer to home. At least we wouldn't be starving there.

Man – Don't panic. We could always go to the consulate...

Woman – The nearest one is two hundred kilometres away. We don't even know where we're sleeping tonight.

Man – So what do you suggest?

Woman – We've no choice. I have to try.

Man – Try what?

Woman – I'll enter the PIN without thinking. I've typed it thousands of times. Perhaps my fingers remember it even if my brain doesn't.

Man – You think so?

Woman – The more I think about it, the less I remember. So I won't think at all. I'll just do it.

Man – I'm not sure that's wise...

Woman – Got a better idea?

Man – No...

Woman – Then here goes.

Man – OK... But really focus.

Woman – No! I just told you, I mustn't think.

Man – Right, right...don't think.

Woman – I'm trying...

Man – I know you can do it...

Woman – I feel like I'm about to bungee jump... OK. I'm going.

She closes her eyes and types in a code. They both hold their breath.

Man – Well?

Woman – It worked!

Man – Hallelujah!

Woman – So we have a little cash, but the machine only lets us withdraw a small amount at a time.

Man – It won't last long. But at least we can withdraw more now that you've remembered your PIN...

Woman – Well, about that...

She looks suddenly troubled.

Man – What?

Woman – I typed the code without thinking...

Man – And...?

Woman – I've no idea what I typed.

Man – You didn't see it?

Woman – I closed my eyes so I wouldn't think about it...

Pause

Man – I have a feeling this is going to be an unforgettable holiday...

Blackout.

10. Childhood Sweethearts

He is already there. She enters.

Woman – Do you recognise me?

Man – No... Should I?

Woman – Mary!

Man – Mary... Do we know each other?

Woman – We were in preschool together.

Man – Preschool?

Woman – I think you even had a little crush on me.

Man – Oh, that's...

Woman – You don't remember?

Man – No... Then again, preschool was a long time ago. But how can you recognise me after all these years? Don't tell me I haven't changed...

Woman – Well yes, of course, we've both changed a lot.

Man – But then how...? If we haven't seen each other since preschool...

Woman – Ah, but I have seen you since. Not every day. Just now and then. But I have seen you.

Man – What do you mean?

Woman – I used to live just across the road. Still do. When my parents passed away about ten years ago, I kept the house. And you... looks like you've moved back in with your parents too...

Man – Yes, well... I haven't been back very long.

Woman – Three months.

Man – Roughly, yes.

Woman – But you used to visit them regularly. So... I'd catch sight of you from time to time.

Man – And you're only speaking to me now?

Woman – I didn't dare... I didn't want to bother you.

Man – So why today?

Woman – I don't know... I got divorced six months ago...

Man – Right...

Woman – And you?

Man – Three months ago... *(Pause)* Did you know?

Woman – Yes.

Man – You knew my wife?

Woman – I'd seen her around.

Man – Seen her around?

Woman – We went to secondary school together.

Man – I see.

Woman – It's a small town.

Man – Yes.

Woman – I imagine it's a bit of a shock.

Man – You mean... the divorce?

Woman – Seeing me again. After all these years.

Man – Oh right... Mary...

A moment of awkward silence. They're not sure what to say next.

Woman – Close your eyes.

Man – Sorry?

Woman – Close your eyes, and listen to my voice.

He closes his eyes.

Man – OK...

She leans in and whispers in his ear, in a voice meant to be enchanting.

Woman – Mary. Mary Wells. We were in the same class when we were little. I had a red coat, with a hood. I wore my hair in pigtails. And one day, in the playground... *(She kisses him on the lips.)* You kissed me. Right on the mouth. You honestly don't remember?

Man *(flustered)* – Mary... Yes, maybe...

He opens his eyes again.

Woman – Of course, seeing me again like this... after so many years... I know I've changed a lot.

Man – Well yes, naturally.

Woman – But I've seen you grow up...

Man – Yes. And even age a little. So of course... It doesn't come as such a shock.

Pause.

Woman – Maybe we could see each other again...

Man – If you live across the road... I'm sure we will.

Woman – All right then... I'll head off.

She turns to go.

Man – Is it true, that story?

Woman – What story?

Man – That we were in preschool together... and all the rest.

Woman – What do you think?

Man – I don't know...

Woman – What would you rather believe?

Man – It's a beautiful story.

Woman – Then let's say it is...

She walks away.

Blackout.

11. The Forgotten Woman

He is already there. She enters.

Man – Hello there. What can I get you?

Woman – I don't know.

Man – You don't look too happy. How about something to cheer you up?

Woman – I'd tell you what I want, but in a minute you'll have forgotten.

Man – I doubt it. I never forget an order.

Woman – You'll forget mine, you'll see.

Man – Oh really? And why's that?

Woman – Because I'm the woman everyone forgets.

Man – Sorry?

Woman – The forgotten woman. It's been like that since the day I was born.

Man – Like what? What do you mean?

Woman – Even when she was pregnant, my mother used to forget she was expecting.

Man – No kidding...

Woman – When I was born, my father forgot to register me. And when my mother left the hospital, she forgot to take me home.

Man – Seriously?

Woman – It's not that they didn't love me. They just forgot me. All the time. They'd regularly forget to pick me up from school. And don't get me started on the number of service stations and hotel rooms where they forgot me during the holidays.

Man – Oh, that's awful...

Woman – On my wedding day, I thought the curse had finally been broken. That at last someone would remember me. But my fiancé forgot to turn up for the ceremony. Even the person meant to marry us forgot to come. And so did my parents...

Man – But you seem very nice. You don't strike me as someone people would forget.

Woman – I know. I've always had a lot of success with men. And yet, I've never broken anyone's heart, I swear. That would have required them to actually remember me. But most of my boyfriends forgot to turn up for the second date.

Man – Right...

Woman – You know the expression 'not on the first date'?

Man – Yes...

Woman – Well, in my case, if it wasn't on the first date, by the second I'd been forgotten.

Man – Must've been tough.

Woman – Job interviews were just as bad. I'd arrive, and nobody would be there. They'd forgotten about me. I did manage to get hired a few times, but eventually everyone forgot there was someone working in my office. Of course, they forgot to pay me too...

Man – And so?

Woman – Since I could never hold down a job, I ended up turning to crime.

Man – Crime? But you don't look the type. How do you manage?

Woman – I take what I want from shops and walk straight out without paying.

Man – You'll end up in prison.

Woman – Not likely! The security guards forget to call the police. Or the police forget to show up. Or the prison guard forgets to lock the cell, because he forgets there's anyone in it.

Man – Well, when you put it like that... I suppose it does have its upsides.

Woman – Once you've served me my drink, if you remember to, I'll leave without paying. And you won't even remember serving me.

Man – Really?

Woman – I've never paid a restaurant bill in my life. And yet I eat out every day.

Man – No way... How long's this been going on?

Woman – Since 1902. That's when I was born.

Man – 1902? But that's impossible.

Woman – Death must have forgotten to come for me too.

Man – I see...

Woman – I'm telling you... You'll forget me too.

Pause.

Man – Hello there. What can I get you?

Blackout.

12. A Total Blank

He is already there. She enters.

Man – Hello. How are you?

Woman – Fine. And you?

Man – Fine, fine.

Woman – Not very warm today, is it?

Man – No, you can't say it's warm. In fact, I'd go so far as to say it's cold.

Woman – Exactly what I was saying. A fine example of understatement.

Man – Of what?

Woman – Understatement! Saying less to suggest more. Like 'I don't dislike you' when you mean 'I love you'.

Man – So 'not very warm' is an understatement?

Woman – It could be.

Man – And it could mean 'I love you'?

She looks thrown for a moment, then does her best to keep the conversation going.

Woman – I'm beginning to wonder if it isn't even colder this year than last.

Man – Quite possibly.

Woman – This time last year I was in my swimsuit on the terrace.

Man – Your swimsuit? At this time of year? Are you sure?

She comes a bit closer.

Woman – Sorry, I was talking nonsense. Trying to fill the silence. I've completely forgotten my lines.

Man – Your lines?

Woman – I've drawn a total blank. A black hole, in fact.

Man – A black hole?

Woman – A blackout, if you prefer. I kept hoping my lines would come back, but they didn't. So I improvised. I'm really sorry.

Man – Sorry? What for?

Woman – For forgetting my lines!

Man – But we don't have any lines!

Woman – We don't?

Man – No. Well, I don't, anyway.

Woman – Are you sure? So you're improvising too?

Man – Well, yes…

Woman – I thought so. Those dreadful clichés! So you've just been talking nonsense. Now it all makes sense.

Man – What do you mean, nonsense?

Woman – Just saying whatever comes into your head.

Man – Well, not everything that pops into my head. I filter a bit, at least.

Woman – And if this is the best of what goes through your head, I shudder to imagine the rest...

Man – So you reckon you had lines?

Woman – Yes.

Man – Lines which you forgot.

Woman – That's what I thought. But are you sure you're not reciting lines too?

Man – I don't know… You think I might be?

Woman – Something doesn't add up.

Man – What doesn't?

Woman – If you're saying lines, I can't be improvising.

Man – Why not?

Woman – It just wouldn't make sense.

Man – Right, yes.

Woman – Unless we're both improvising.

Man – Or we're both following a script.

Woman – But who on earth would've written such nonsense?

Man – Well, you know contemporary theatre. Maybe the playwright was improvising too.

Woman – Ah yes, automatic writing and all that.

Man – I thought that had gone out of fashion.

Woman – What's certain is, the writer definitely had no script. At the start.

Man – So, in a way, he was improvising...

Woman – Yes, you could say that.

Man – So why shouldn't we improvise a little ourselves?

Woman – Actually, I'm wondering if...

Man – What?

Woman – Perhaps we're writing the play for the author.

Man – I see. The characters improvise, and the author simply writes it down.

Woman – And he's the one collecting the royalties.

Man – Playwriting. What an easy job.

Woman – Worse than that. It's plagiarism.

Man – Plagiarism?

Woman – If the author is stealing from his own characters...

Man – Still, as you said, what we've come up with isn't exactly great literature.

Woman – No. Let's be honest.

Man – Maybe we've improvised enough now, don't you think?

Woman – Yes. That'll do.

Man – So?

Woman – What?

Man – What were we saying before we started talking?

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 the savage beasts
Neighbours' Day
Nicotine
Of Vegetables and Books
Offside
Open Hearts
Reality Show
Save our Savings
Special Dedication
Stories and Prehistories
Such a lovely village
The House of Our Dreams
The Jackpot
The Performance is not cancelled
The Most Beautiful Village in France
The Worst Village in England
Welcome aboard!
White Coats, Dark Humour

Collection of sketches

Apocalypse
Backstage Bits
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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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