

Counter Zero

Sketches · 15-character play · 7 women, 6 men, 2 either · 30 min · Beginner · Ages 10+

In the basement of the town hall, at the end of the corridor, a counter with no number accepts the requests that every other counter turns down: getting back a lost hour, declaring a dream, making a complaint against the Moon, changing your name for just one Thursday. Nina and Bruno have worked there for thirty-two years, without ever being hired. This morning, an inspector comes down the stairs with orders to close it.

The basement of a town hall, at the end of a corridor: a counter under a handwritten sign, some chairs, a ticket machine. The present day, over several days.

Casting

NINA (Female role, Adult) forties, has worked at Counter Zero for thirty-two years, keeps the register.

BRUNO (Male role, Adult) forties, has worked at Counter Zero for thirty-two years, writes the forms that don't exist yet.

ALMA (Female role, Child) nearly twelve, born on 27 March at half past one in the morning.

JONAS (Male role, Adult) fifties, night watchman at a natural history museum.

ZOÉ (Female role, Teen) twelve, had a dream on Sunday night.

ARTHUR (Male role, Teen) twelve, also had a dream on Sunday night.

RAFAEL (Male role, Teen) thirteen, walks home from chess club every evening.

NOA (No gender marker, Teen) fourteen, has had a telescope on the balcony for three years.

ELENA (Female role, Teen) thirteen, sees her grandmother every Thursday.

TOM (Male role, Teen) thirteen, one of the three Toms in his class.

INÈS (Female role, Teen) twelve, said something on Tuesday, at break.

SAM (No gender marker, Teen) twelve, has known Inès since the age of six, heard that sentence.

L'INSPECTRICE (Female role, Adult) forties, city services inspector, has come to close Counter Zero.

LÉON (Male role, Young adult) twenty, the inspector's intern, carries a tape measure.

MILA (Female role, Child) eleven, has been waiting for her turn since opening time.

SCENE 1: THE LOST HOUR

(A counter. Behind it, Nina and Bruno. Above it, a handwritten sign: "Counter Zero". On the counter: a register, a rubber stamp, a small pair of scales with two pans. Next to the door, a ticket machine. Alma comes in, takes a ticket, looks at it.)

ALMA. Zero.

NINA. That's you. Come forward.

ALMA. Isn't there anyone else?

NINA. Here, it's always zero.

(Bruno looks at the door, then at Alma.)

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. Good morning. Counter Zero. What is your request?

ALMA. I went to counter one, then two, all the way to eleven. At eleven, they told me: "Go downstairs, there's a counter for weird stuff."

NINA. For requests that don't have a counter. It's not the same thing.

ALMA. I'd like to get an hour back.

BRUNO. An hour of what?

ALMA. An hour of night. The one in March. When the clocks go forward, at one o'clock it's suddenly two.

NINA. People were sleeping in that one. They want it back.

ALMA. I wasn't sleeping. I was being born.

BRUNO. Sorry?

ALMA. I was born on the twenty-seventh of March, at half past one in the morning. This year, the clocks went forward on the night of the twenty-seventh of March. Half past one never happened.

NINA. So?

ALMA. So I never turned twelve. My mum bought a cake. We waited for half past one. It went straight to two o'clock. I'm still eleven.

(Bruno opens several drawers.)

BRUNO. There's no form for "Birthday lost in the clock change".

NINA. Write one.

BRUNO. Again?

NINA. It's your job.

ALMA. At school, everyone thinks I'm twelve. My mum too. I'm the only one who knows. I'm the only one in my class who's twelve minus an hour.

(Jonas comes in, takes a ticket.)

JONAS. Zero.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. Take a seat, we're just finishing with the young lady.

JONAS. I can wait. I'm a night watchman.

ALMA. What do you watch?

JONAS. Dinosaurs. At the natural history museum. They don't do much, but someone has to be there. At night, I talk to them. They never answer, but they're very good listeners.

NINA. The March hours go away. Nobody knows where.

ALMA. So I'm never going to be twelve?

NINA. Next year, you'll go straight to thirteen.

ALMA. I don't want to skip a year!

JONAS. Excuse me. Actually, I've come about an hour too.

NINA. Have you lost one as well?

JONAS. No. I've got one too many. At the end of October, the clocks go back. At two o'clock, it's one o'clock again. And right then, I'm at the museum. All alone. I live the same hour twice.

BRUNO. So?

JONAS. The first time, I do my rounds. The second time, I do the same rounds again, past the same dinosaurs. I'd like to give it back.

NINA. Nobody gives an hour back.

JONAS. I do. It's no use to me. I don't even get paid for it.

BRUNO. He's got one too many. She's got one too few.

NINA. An October hour won't fit into a March birthday. It's not the same season. It's colder.

ALMA. I can wear a jumper.

BRUNO. Wait. We don't move the hour. We move the birthday.

ALMA. How?

BRUNO. At the end of October, the second time it's one o'clock, you wait for half past one. And then, you're twelve.

NINA. That hour is empty. Nobody uses it.

ALMA. But where? At my house, at that time of night, everyone's asleep.

JONAS. At the museum, at that time of night, there's someone. Me. I'm there every year.

ALMA. Surrounded by dinosaurs?

JONAS. They're very calm. They don't sing out of tune.

ALMA. Can I come with my mum?

JONAS. With your mum, yes. And with the cake.

(Nina stamps the register.)

NINA. Transfer of one October hour. Granted.

ALMA. Thank you. I'll turn twelve in your hour.

JONAS. It'll be shorter now. An hour goes fast when there's someone with you.

(Alma goes out. Jonas stays.)

JONAS. What do people eat at a birthday party? I haven't been to one in a long time.

BRUNO. Cake.

JONAS. I'll ask the dinosaurs. They've seen a lot of birthdays come and go.

(He goes out.)

SCENE 2: THE DOUBLE DREAM

(Nina and Bruno at the counter. Zoé comes in, takes a ticket.)

ZOÉ. Zero. Hello. I've come to declare a dream.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. A recent dream?

ZOÉ. Sunday night. I want to declare it before somebody takes it.

NINA. Why would somebody take it?

ZOÉ. Because it's good. I told it at lunch. Everybody listened. Even the ones who never listen.

(Bruno takes a sheet of paper out of a drawer.)

BRUNO. Dream declaration form. Date?

ZOÉ. Sunday night. Well, Monday morning. About four o'clock.

BRUNO. Place?

ZOÉ. The school gym. But full of water. And in the middle, there was a whale.

BRUNO. Colour of the whale?

ZOÉ. Blue. Really blue. And it talked.

NINA. What did it say?

ZOÉ. "Not now." That's all it ever said.

(Arthur comes in, takes a ticket.)

ARTHUR. Zero. Is this where you declare a dream?

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. Take a seat.

ARTHUR. I dreamed about a whale in the school gym.

ZOÉ. No.

ARTHUR. Yes. Sunday night.

ZOÉ. That's my dream! You were at my table at lunch! You heard it!

ARTHUR. Yeah, I heard it, and I thought: hang on, that's my dream.

NINA. Two declarations for one dream. Let's compare.

BRUNO. Colour of the whale?

ARTHUR. Grey.

ZOÉ. Blue!

ARTHUR. Grey with blue underneath. You didn't see it from below, that's all.

BRUNO. What did it say?

ARTHUR. "Not now."

ZOÉ. He heard that at lunch.

ARTHUR. And do you know how it ends?

ZOÉ. I woke up. It opened its mouth, and my alarm went off.

ARTHUR. I didn't wake up. I went inside the mouth.

ZOÉ. You're lying.

ARTHUR. Inside, it was dry. It smelled of paper. There was a lamp, shelves, files up to the ceiling. And a desk.

NINA. A desk?

ARTHUR. With someone behind it. Stamping papers.

NINA. With a red stamp?

ARTHUR. Red, yes.

NINA. And odd socks? One green, one yellow?

ARTHUR. How do you know?

(Nina gets up and comes round the counter. She is wearing one green sock and one yellow sock.)

BRUNO. Nina.

NINA. That was me. I was inside the whale. I was stamping.

ZOÉ. You had the same dream?

NINA. Before you did. Monday, three fifty-eight. That dream is my place. You

came in without a ticket.

ARTHUR. We didn't know you needed a ticket.

ZOÉ. So it's nobody's dream?

NINA. It's three people's dream. That's even worse.

ZOÉ. I want it. It's the first dream I've ever remembered all the way through. Usually I only keep a little bit, a door, a smell.

ARTHUR. I never dream. My mum says I sleep like a suitcase. This is my first one.

ZOÉ. The first one in your whole life?

ARTHUR. The first one. And it already belongs to someone.

(A pause.)

BRUNO. We could put it in joint ownership. One night each.

ZOÉ. Fine. Monday, me.

ARTHUR. Tuesday, me. And I want to see the end.

NINA. Wednesday, me. And in my office, you knock before you come in.

ZOÉ. And the whale, do we ask what it thinks?

ARTHUR. It'll say "Not now". That's all it says.

ZOÉ. Then we'll wait. It'll say something else in the end.

(Nina stamps the register.)

NINA. Dream in joint ownership. Granted.

(Zoé and Arthur go out arguing about the colour. Nina sits back down.)

NINA. Aren't you going to say anything?

BRUNO. On Sunday, I was the whale.

NINA. That was you?

BRUNO. That was me.

NINA. And why did you keep saying "Not now"?

BRUNO. I don't know. I was waiting for someone.

SCENE 3: COMPLAINT AGAINST THE MOON

(Nina and Bruno at the counter. Rafael comes in, takes a ticket.)

RAFAEL. Zero. I've come to make a complaint.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. Against whom?

RAFAEL. Against the Moon.

BRUNO. Grounds?

RAFAEL. She follows me. Every evening, I walk home from chess club. Twenty minutes. I turn left, she turns left. I stop at the bakery, she stops above the bakery.

BRUNO. Does she go in?

RAFAEL. No. She waits outside. Like a dog.

NINA. Have you tried running?

RAFAEL. She runs faster than me. Last night, I closed my shutters. This morning, she was still there, all pale, above the school. She never sleeps. It's not normal.

(Noa comes in, takes a ticket.)

NOA. Zero. I've come to make a complaint against the Moon.

BRUNO. It's not her. Is she following you too?

NOA. No. That's the thing. She doesn't follow me any more.

RAFAEL. What do you mean, any more?

NOA. I've had a telescope on my balcony for three years. Every evening, she goes right past it. Like an appointment. Since Friday, she's been going past to one side. She's heading east. Towards the street with the chess club.

RAFAEL. That's my street.

NOA. Then it's you.

RAFAEL. I haven't done anything!

NOA. Since when has she been following you?

RAFAEL. Since Friday.

(A pause.)

NOA. Three years. On Friday, I waited for her until midnight. I watched a pigeon instead. And you close your shutters.

BRUNO. Complaint form. Opposing party: the Moon. Address?

NINA. She hasn't got an address.

BRUNO. The opposing party has to be informed. That's the rule.

NOA. I know where she is. Up there, a bit to the right.

BRUNO. Up there, a bit to the right. We'd need a witness.

(Nina climbs onto a chair and opens the little basement window. A white light comes in.)

NINA. She's there.

RAFAEL. You see! She follows me all the way to the town hall!

NOA. It's you she's looking at. She doesn't even see me.

BRUNO. Complaint number one: you follow too much. Complaint number two: you don't follow any more.

NINA. They cancel each other out.

BRUNO. They don't cancel out. They share. On even days, she follows the young man. On odd days, she goes past the telescope.

RAFAEL. And on odd days, I walk home in the dark?

BRUNO. You wanted her to stop.

RAFAEL. Yes. No. My street's only got one streetlight, and it's broken. Before Friday, I used to run home. Since Friday, I walk.

NOA. Are you scared of the dark?

RAFAEL. I'm scared of the way home. It's not the same thing.

NOA. Without her, my telescope just looks at a wall.

(A pause. The light from the window moves a little.)

NOA. What time does your club finish?

RAFAEL. Nine o'clock.

NOA. My street's just after the bakery. What if you came past my place on your way home?

RAFAEL. That's a detour.

NOA. She likes detours. That's all she ever does.

RAFAEL. And you'll let me look through the telescope? To see what she's like close up, the Moon that follows me?

NOA. She's got holes everywhere, and one side she never shows. You'll be disappointed.

RAFAEL. I don't care. I've got a side I never show too.

NOA. Which one?

RAFAEL. I lose at chess. Every evening. That's why I walk home on my own.

(Bruno stamps the register.)

BRUNO. Two complaints against the Moon. Dismissed. The Moon is requested to follow both parties. Granted.

(Rafael and Noa go out together. Nina closes the window.)

BRUNO. Is she still there?

NINA. She left with them.

BRUNO. She's never followed me.

NINA. You never leave this place.

BRUNO. What if I go out, and she comes while I'm gone?

SCENE 4: A NAME FOR THURSDAY

(Nina and Bruno at the counter. Elena comes in, takes a ticket.)

ELENA. Zero. Hello. I'd like to change my name.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. For ever?

ELENA. For Thursday. From eight in the morning to eight in the evening. After that, I take mine back.

NINA. Who are you the rest of the week?

ELENA. Elena. And on Thursday, I'd like to be called Rosa.

BRUNO. Why Rosa?

ELENA. On Thursdays, my grandmother comes to our house. She looks at me, she smiles, and she says: "Hello, Rosa." Rosa is my mum, when she was my age.

NINA. And what do you say?

ELENA. I say: "No, Gran, it's Elena." Then she stops smiling. She looks at her hands. She says: "Of course. Sorry." And all afternoon, she keeps saying sorry. For the tea, for the door, for everything.

(A pause.)

ELENA. On Thursday, I'd like her to be right. Just once.

(Bruno takes a blank sheet of paper and starts writing.)

BRUNO. Problem. If you're Rosa on Thursday, "Elena" is left empty.

ELENA. So?

BRUNO. An empty name gets damaged. It gathers dust. On Friday, you put it back on, and it itches.

NINA. Someone has to wear it.

ELENA. Who'd want to wear my name on a Thursday?

(Tom comes in, takes a ticket.)

TOM. Zero. Hello. I'd like to change my name.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. For Thursday too?

TOM. For ever. My name's Tom. There are three Toms in my class. Tom B., Tom L., and me.

ELENA. So which one are you?

TOM. I'm "the other Tom". When the teacher says "Tom", all three of us put our hands up, and it's never me. Last year, I got Tom B.'s mark. An F. Nobody believed me.

BRUNO. What would you like to be called?

TOM. I don't know. A name nobody else has got. I thought you'd have a list down here.

NINA. We haven't got a list.

TOM. Then I'll take whatever you've got.

BRUNO. We've got a name going free on Thursday. Elena.

(Tom looks at Elena.)

TOM. Elena?

ELENA. It's mine. It's a very good one. I've never met another Elena.

TOM. There aren't any in my class. Nobody would put their hand up instead of me.

ELENA. You look after it. You don't shout it in the corridors. And on Thursday evening, you give it back.

TOM. What if I like it?

ELENA. You give it back anyway. And if anyone calls you, you answer nicely. I don't want people saying Elena's rude.

NINA. Then "Tom" is left empty.

TOM. There are two others. They can squeeze up.

NINA. No. An empty name gets damaged.

(A pause. Bruno puts down his pen.)

BRUNO. I'll take Tom.

NINA. You?

BRUNO. For one Thursday. I've been called Bruno for ever.

TOM. You'll be the oldest Tom in town.

BRUNO. And when someone says "Tom", I won't put my hand up. That way, it'll be you.

NINA. And "Bruno"? That's left empty.

BRUNO. Does anyone want Bruno?

ELENA. No, thanks.

TOM. No.

(Nina opens the counter drawer.)

NINA. I'll keep it in the drawer. It won't gather dust in there.

(She stamps the register.)

NINA. Thursday. Elena becomes Rosa. Tom becomes Elena. Bruno becomes Tom. Bruno stays in the drawer. Granted.

TOM. And what am I called on Friday?

BRUNO. Tom. But you'll have been Elena. It shows, afterwards.

ELENA. And what if on Thursday my grandmother calls me Elena? What if, on that exact day, she remembers?

TOM. Call me. I'll come.

(They go out.)

SCENE 5: TAKING BACK A SENTENCE

(Nina and Bruno at the counter. Inès comes in, takes a ticket.)

INÈS. Zero. I'd like to take back a sentence.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. Which sentence?

INÈS. On Tuesday, at break, I said: "Anyway, you never understand anything."

NINA. To whom?

INÈS. To Sam. We've known each other since we were six. I'd like you to delete it. So that Sam doesn't remember it any more.

NINA. We don't delete. We replace, with a sentence of the same weight. Write it down.

(Inès writes on a piece of paper and puts it on one pan of the scales. The pan drops all at once.)

BRUNO. Four hundred grams.

INÈS. For five words?

NINA. Now write the one that replaces it.

(Inès writes and puts a piece of paper on the other pan. Nothing moves.)

INÈS. "Sorry."

BRUNO. Ten grams.

(She writes again.)

INÈS. "I'm really sorry, I didn't mean it."

BRUNO. Thirty. Everybody says "I didn't mean it".

INÈS. "You understand loads of things."

BRUNO. Fifty. "Loads of things" is vague.

(Inès writes again, for longer.)

INÈS. "You're my favourite person in the whole school."

BRUNO. Two hundred grams. But it doesn't replace anything. It just adds on.

INÈS. Then I'll keep it for later. I'm never going to manage this.

(Sam comes in, takes a ticket. Inès takes her papers back off the second pan and hides them behind her back.)

SAM. Zero. Hello. I'd like to claim an answer.

BRUNO. It's not her.

INÈS. Sam.

SAM. Inès.

NINA. What answer?

SAM. On Tuesday, after break, I asked a question: "Are we still talking?" No answer. Wednesday, nothing. Thursday, nothing. Six years is more than two thousand days. We've talked every single day. Except Wednesday and Thursday. Normally, a question gets an answer. So I've come to claim it.

NINA. Any idea where it went?

SAM. Somewhere between the playground and the maths room.

(Inès shows the papers.)

INÈS. It's here. Well, I'm trying.

SAM. What is it?

INÈS. Sentences. To replace the one from Tuesday. They're too light.

(Sam takes the papers and reads them.)

SAM. "Sorry." Ten grams?

BRUNO. Nine and a half.

SAM. On Tuesday, you were right. I didn't understand anything. You were weird all morning, and I kept telling jokes. The one about the penguin in the lift. Three times.

INÈS. Four.

SAM. Four. And you weren't laughing, so I started again.

INÈS. My rabbit died on Monday night.

(A pause.)

SAM. You didn't tell me.

INÈS. I didn't tell anyone. I thought if I didn't say it, it wasn't true. Sorry.

(The second pan of the scales goes down, slowly, until it is level with the first.)

BRUNO. Four hundred grams.

NINA. Four hundred and ten.

SAM. She didn't even write it down.

NINA. Those ones, we don't write down.

SAM. What was your rabbit called?

INÈS. Captain.

SAM. A rabbit called Captain?

INÈS. He was in charge of the hutch.

(Sam laughs. Inès does too, a little.)

SAM. And my answer? Are we still talking?

INÈS. We're talking right now.

SAM. Does that count? We're in a town hall. Maybe we need a form.

(Bruno picks up the stamp. Nina puts her hand on his.)

NINA. Leave it. That one doesn't go through us.

(Inès and Sam go out together.)

SAM. So a penguin walks into a lift...

INÈS. No!

SCENE 6: THE INSPECTION

(Nina and Bruno at the counter. Mila is sitting on a chair, a ticket in her hand. Footsteps on the stairs. Bruno slips the stamp into the left-hand drawer, under a dictionary.)

(The inspector comes in, her hair held up with a pencil. Léon follows her, a tape measure and a binder in his arms.)

L'INSPECTRICE. Good morning. City Services Inspection.

BRUNO. It's not her.

NINA. It's never her. Take a ticket.

L'INSPECTRICE. I'm not here to make a request. I'm here to close this counter.

MILA. I was here first.

L'INSPECTRICE. It won't take long.

MILA. That's what they told me at counter one. At nine o'clock.

L'INSPECTRICE. Léon.

(Léon unrolls the tape measure along the counter.)

LÉON. Counter with no number. Not on any of the town hall plans. One metre twenty of counter. Two chairs. A pair of scales. A ticket machine.

(He takes a ticket, then another.)

LÉON. Zero. Zero. It only gives out zeros.

L'INSPECTRICE. Léon.

LÉON. Sorry.

L'INSPECTRICE. This counter has no budget. No phone. And you two aren't on

any staff list. Who hired you?

NINA. Nobody.

BRUNO. We were told to sit here.

L'INSPECTRICE. By whom?

NINA. Someone who was coming back.

L'INSPECTRICE. Since when?

BRUNO. Thirty-two years. In May.

LÉON. That's a lot of waiting.

L'INSPECTRICE. I'm taking the inventory, and then I'm putting seals on everything. The register. The stamp.

(Nina and Bruno don't move. The inspector opens the left-hand drawer, lifts up a dictionary and takes the stamp.)

BRUNO. How did you know?

L'INSPECTRICE. That's where stamps go. Everywhere.

NINA. Everywhere, it's the right-hand drawer.

MILA. Is it nearly my turn?

L'INSPECTRICE. There are no more turns. The counter is closing.

MILA. Then I'll wait for it to open again.

LÉON. She looks serious.

MILA. I am serious. I took a ticket. At counter one, they sent me to two. At two, to three. At eleven, they told me to go downstairs. I'm not going back up.

LÉON. So what's your request?

MILA. I'll say it when it's my turn.

L'INSPECTRICE. Léon, the register.

(Léon opens the register at the back and turns the pages towards the front.)

LÉON. "Two complaints against the Moon." "Dream in joint ownership."
"Transfer of one October hour." Madam, this is complete nonsense.

L'INSPECTRICE. Is it all written down?

LÉON. Everything's written down. And everything's granted. There's no page one. It starts on page zero.

L'INSPECTRICE. Read it.

LÉON. "Request zero. Tomorrow, we're moving to another town. I want someone to write down somewhere that I lived here. At counter one, they sent me to two. At two, to three. At eleven, they told me it didn't exist. So I'm sitting down at this table, and I'm opening a counter. Signed: Clara, aged eleven."

(The inspector puts the stamp down on the counter. Mila stands up and looks at her.)

LÉON. Madam? Your name's Clara, isn't it?

L'INSPECTRICE. There are lots of Claras.

NINA. She had a pencil in her hair.

BRUNO. She wrote the sign with a felt-tip that had nearly run dry.

NINA. I'd come to report a lost sock. A yellow one. She gave me a green one.

BRUNO. I was ten. I was looking for the toilets.

NINA. She told us: "Sit here, both of you. I'll be back."

BRUNO. So we sat down.

(A pause. The inspector touches the pencil in her hair.)

L'INSPECTRICE. The next morning, the car was packed. I never came back. I thought you'd gone home.

BRUNO. Someone had to keep the place. In the evening, we went home. In the morning, we came back. Just in case.

NINA. And then people started coming. Someone had to answer them.

L'INSPECTRICE. And my request? Was it turned down, like everywhere else?

(Nina turns the register towards her.)

NINA. Read underneath.

L'INSPECTRICE. "Noted: Clara lived here. Granted."

(A pause.)

LÉON. Madam. What do I put in the report?

L'INSPECTRICE. I've been closing counters for fifteen years, Léon. This one was going to be the forty-third.

MILA. Is it my turn now?

L'INSPECTRICE. What is your request?

MILA. I'd like a counter for people who haven't got a counter. For requests that are too small, or too weird, or too big. Upstairs, they say they don't exist. Down here, you write them down. But just now, somebody said it was closing.

(The inspector holds the stamp out to Nina.)

L'INSPECTRICE. It's your counter.

(Nina stamps the register.)

NINA. Request granted.

MILA. Thank you. I'll be back. I've got more, little ones.

(Mila runs out.)

L'INSPECTRICE. Léon, write this down. Counter Zero. One metre twenty. Two members of staff. A full register. Nothing to close.

LÉON. And the seals?

L'INSPECTRICE. Keep them. We'll need them somewhere else.

(Léon goes out. The inspector goes to the ticket machine and takes a ticket. She looks at it.)

L'INSPECTRICE. Zero.

NINA. Good morning. Counter Zero. What is your request?

L'INSPECTRICE. I'd like to come back.

(Bruno looks at the door, then at the inspector.)

BRUNO. It's her.

(Blackout.)



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